STORY
SHIROW SHIRATORI

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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

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AI HINATSURU:
A third grader who adores Yaichi so much she went to great lengths to become his apprentice.
YAICHI KUZURYU:
Current Ryuo and 16 years old. However, he's been on a losing streak since winning his title.
GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's senior apprentice and "sister." Holds two titles.
KEIKA KIYOTAKI
Daughter of Yaichi's Master, and his idol.
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CHARLETTE ISOIR
A 6 year old attending a nearby school for French students. Far too cute.
AYANO SADATOU:
A level-headed young lady in the third grade.
MIO MIZUKOSHI:
A tomboyish firecracker, also in third grade.
A practice session made up of nothing but elementary school girls. "Grade Schooler Session" is it? Well, this'll be legendary...


"RYUO'S APPRENTICE"
VS
"NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE"
-MATCH UNDERWAY!!!-

THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

VOLUME 1

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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"Master ··· It's rock hard. ···"

A lot has happened in the three months since I took the title of *Ryuo*, including taking on my first apprentice, a girl in the third grade. One thing led to another and now she's living with me.

"Mngh ··· It's just too haaard ···"

This nine-year-old girl sitting in front of me, her soft cheeks rosier than you can imagine, leaned over with her cute eyes glued to her Master's round formation, whining like a puppy.

This girl is so cute, I'd swear she's an angel.

Feeling a little guilty that my wall got this hard playing with an innocent, still young enough to be considered "little" little girl like this, didn't stop me.

It's so hard, this is bordering on inappropriate advantage.

"Nh ···"

My first apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru, takes a few hot, moist breaths before exposing her position and inviting me to make my move.

A bold technique for an elementary school girl.

But, I just gotta ···

"··· You sure, Ai?"

My young apprentice has made her decision, and I confirm.

She ···

"....."

She nods and says nothing, her little body trembling ever so slightly ···

I hesitate for only a moment, but my mind is made up. It's an

open invitation.

"Here I go ···"

"Y-yes ···!"

I reach out, aiming for her most vital point, closer and closer.

Then, just as my finger touched it ···

"Ah! N-no, I take it back!!"

Ai's whole body flinches, unable to hold back a scream for mercy.

She never expected my hand to go there, and her knee-jerk reaction is priceless. But I'm enjoying every second of it.

"*Shisho*, please ··· wait ···"

"No."

I speak coolly. Waiting isn't allowed.

"That word doesn't exist for professional Shogi players."

"Hyee ···!" Ai is on the verge of tears.

A perfectly normal reaction losing your Rook (*hisha*) and being put in check *(oute)* at the same time. Love has no place on a Shogi board.

April. Osaka.

The cherry blossom trees in Osaka Castle Park are a few days past full bloom, their many petals fluttering to the ground like pink snow on a warm spring breeze.

People have come from far and wide to look at the pink flowers tilt their heads in our direction.

"··· What'er they doin'?"

"··· Shogi? Here, of all places?"

"Even cute little girls like that play Shogi?"

"Wouldn' it be a real pain, draggin' that thing out of the house?

Their Shogi board don't look all that light ···"

"Hold up, isn't that Yaichi Kuzuryu, the pro Shogi player?"

A few Shogi fans recognize me and start snapping pictures with their smartphones.

Ai and I have been playing a game of Shogi beneath a particularly marvelous blossoming cherry tree in the middle of a park on the west of Osaka Castle, Maruteien, known for cherry blossoms.

We've been at it since early this morning, so a lot of fallen petals have gotten stuck in Ai's smooth, shiny hair already.

I whisk away the petals that fell on the board with my fan and point at the chess clock (basically two alarm clocks that keep time for Shogi matches; accurate down to the second) to put more pressure on my apprentice.

"See? You'll run out of time if you don't move fast!"

"Uwh ··· mmhh ···!"

From there, she put up a better fight than the usual grade schooler, her eyes absolutely on fire. But she couldn't hold off the *Ryuo*'s attack at such an overwhelming disadvantage and threw in the towel.

"··· I lost," she says, her whole body writhing in the agony of defeat.

Then she points at my side of the board, specifically the hard, impenetrable circle of defense around my King.

"You're mean, Master! That's evil! What am I supposed to do about it: a King hiding behind a hard wall like that?!"

"Told you, didn't I? An even match wouldn't be a match at all."

Of course, a grade schooler challenging a pro Shogi player to a

game with no handicap would get their butt handed to them on a silver platter.

Even if this grade schooler was far better than average.

I know she's got real talent. That's why I didn't show mercy, and why I took her as my apprentice. This is talent that any professional Shogi player must have, and she's got it in spades.

And that talent is ···

"One more! One more match, please!"

"Another one? What're we up to now? Twenty? Thirty ···?"

We've been nonstop since this morning, but she still hasn't had enough. Not that I don't understand where she's coming from.

After all, Shogi pros are people who can go out for a night of karaoke and spend it huddled around a smuggled-in Shogi board without singing a single song. That includes me.

I've lost pieces to the ocean waves on trips to the beach, played quick league matches with my head in a fog due to altitude sickness after climbing a mountain ···

"Hey, aren't Ginko and Keika late? Mio and her friends should be here by now too ···"

"You're right. Oh, wanna play a match while we wait? Wanna? Wanna?!"

A lightbulb clicked on.

"Ai ··· Did you tell everyone about the picnic today?"

"I told them?"

"You didn't, did you?"

"I did, I did! ··· Just might've fibbed the time a little bit."

"Hey!"

"It's fine. They'll come in about four hours."

Four whole hours.

"It'll be night by then! Why the heck did you do that?!"

"B-but …"

Ai looks away, puckering her lips and says barely above a whisper, "… I wanted to play, play, play and play Shogi, just the two of us …"

"……!!"

That has to be against the rules.

This little girl, so cute that everyone walking through Osaka Castle's massive park is rubber necking for a closer look, asking me to play Shogi with those big, trembling eyes glistening with tears.

And she's my apprentice—my very first one.

I can't! How could anyone resist that? It's impossible!!

"… Ten-minute waiting time. Thirty seconds once it's out, got it?"

"Yay! I love you, Master♡"

"Yeah, yeah."

Sure, that no-holds-barred confession of love made my heart skip a beat, but I remind myself she's in grade school right away. I don't have a Lolita complex or anything. But she's just too damn cute. Gah …

Cursing myself for giving into her every whim, we start lining up pieces on the board, excitedly clacking back and forth like people playing catch.

This tiny little girl sitting in front of a thick Shogi board.

She showed up out of the blue one day, appearing like an angel and I was saved.

Saved by her purity, and by her love of Shogi.

"Whenever you're ready!"

All pieces lined up in a neat little row, Ai sits up straight with perfect posture before bowing so low that she almost hits her forehead on the board.

As soon as my bow is complete, she's already up and holding her first piece as if the match can't start soon enough. Her small hand dances over the board as more delicate pink petals dance on the breeze overhead.

"…… Nh!"

Making the first move, Ai slaps the piece into place with a loud *click*! Sighs come from the people who came here to see the cherry blossom trees but instead happened to witness something more beautiful and fleeting than the pink flowers.

Then Ai sits up a little bit, stretching out to reach the chess clock and gives it a hard whack.

Now it's my turn.

Huh, seeing the clock tick like this sure brings back memories.

The day I first met Ai—everything that happened on the day that our chess clock started marking time.

RECORD 1

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO

PROFILE

九頭竜八一(Kuzuryu, Yaichi)竜王 (Ryuo)


Yaichi Kuzuryu

REGISTRATION NUMBER:	333
DATE OF BIRTH:	8/1/2000
HOMETOWN:	Ohno City, Fukui
MASTER:	Kiyotaki, Kousuke 9-*dan*
RYUO MATCH:	29th season (Above Class I—1st season)
MATCH RANK:	C League, Class 2
PROGRESSION HISTORY:	9/2009 League 6 10/1/2015 4-*dan* 9/8/2016 7-*dan* 12/25/2016 8-*dan*

TITLE HISTORY:

RYUO	1 SEASON (29TH – 2016)
TOTAL APPEARANCES:	1 *RYUO*: 1
POSSESSION:	1 SEASON

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"WIZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!!"

A man's yell blares through Naniwa's streets.

This is Osaka. A rather strange building with *Shogi Kaikan* written in big, bold letters on the outside wall.

Said man loosens his belt and leans out the fifth-floor window, pants falling to his knees, exposing his boxer shorts for all to see, and yells at the top of his lungs.

"Wizz! Gonna wiz!"

"Kiyotaki-*sensei*! Get down from there, it's dangerous!!"

"You're a full-fledged 9-*dan*! What's a fifty year old like yourself doin' up there?!"

"WIZZZZZZ!! WIZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!!"

All the staff members here at the Kansai Shogi Headquarters and other pro Shogi players like myself rush in to stop him, but the man—Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* (50 years old)—didn't listen. He was actually getting even louder, more insistent.

"That a jumper?!"

"Huh?! Underpants?!"

Office workers, men and women alike, stopping to gawk at street level down below. Heck, they're taking pics with their smartphones.

"Master!! Please, stop!! This is madness!!"

I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, grab hold of my Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki's waist to keep him from falling out the window and pull with everything I've got.

"Hands off me, Yaichiiiii!! I'm gonna … gonna wiz right

herrrrreeeee!!"

My Master yells with his skivvies fully exposed and clinging to the windowsill. Practically howling.

"WIIIIIZZZ

he's a prominent figure in Kansai's Shogi scene.

"The opponent may be an apprentice of mine, but he's a title holder as well. I relish the opportunity to test my abilities against such skill. I want to unleash my youthful spirit, let it flow freely during today's match."

He sat on his ankles, grinning at me with his eyes while talking with the reporters. I swear his fighting spirit was spewing out from behind that new suit he was wearing.

After we agreed to shake hands over the Shogi board to satisfy a reporter's request, the air in here took on a somber, but kind of warm tone: my first real match against my Master got underway——.

And now Master has exposed his legs right along with that youthful spirit, dead set on "unleashing a free flow" from a fifth-floor window of the *Shogi Kaikan*, practically a holy site for the Kansai Shogi community.

"WIIIIIZZZZZ FOUNTAAAAAIIIINNNN!!"

"DON'T YOU DAAAAAARRRRRRRREEEEE!!"

Every free hand at the Japan Shogi Association Headquarters moves in to stop the wiz fountain from liftoff.

Oh yeah, I won the match.

The Shogi world has a word for when a student defeats their Master: *Gratitude*.

"*This is how strong I've become. Thank you for your teachings.*"

We express that gratitude not with words, but with victory.

But it's also true that losing a Shogi match, even if it's to your

adorable apprentice, hurts like hell: being so handily beaten by someone you think of as your own kid, someone who barely stood a chance against you without a handicap only a few years ago!

Now that would take your pro player pride down a few notches, and probably hurt *sooo* much more than the average loss.

"Think of the position that you relieving yourself here would put me in, Master!"

"WIZZZZZZZZZZZZ!! WIZ FOUNTAAAAIIIINNN!!"

That's my Master (50) clinging to the windowsill like a spoiled child refusing to leave a toy store. I realize he's hurting, but this is way too much.

The reporters came here hoping to write a heart-touching story with quotes like "You've grown strong, Yaichi" and my teary-eyed "M-Master!" But instead get a "wiz fountain" photo opp. There's no way they can write about this.

And, honestly, I'm disappointed.

Never in a million years did I think that he'd praise me, but I was hoping that he'd show some grace in defeat, like an honorable *samurai* of the Shogi world.

But the reality is completely different. The reality is an old man going number one.

He ended the match, acknowledging defeat by throwing captured pieces onto the board (horrible manners by the way) and staying silent in agony. Face down, staring into his lap, shoulders shaking. It hurt, it hurt so bad that his body shook.

Talk about an awkward silence, and I couldn't say anything. "*Oh boy … Now I've done it …*" That kind of feeling while sitting on my own feet.

Normally, we'd be dissecting the match about now, but it clearly wasn't the right mood for that. Even the reporters were staring at the floor like they were attending a vigil or at somebody's funeral.

Master just sat there quivering for upwards of fifteen minutes.

Then, completely out of the blue, he jumped to his feet and ran over to the window, yelling at the top of his lungs.

"WWWWWIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ————!!"

"ENOUGH ALREADYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY————!!"

I've had it! I can't take this anymore!

I hate to do this, especially to my own Master … But I can throw my weight around.

"As *Ryuo*, I order you to use the toilet like a grown man!!"

"……!!"

His whole body twitches, the hand that was on its way to pull down his boxers stops in midair.

Shogi begins and ends with respect, a bow. It's a battle of minds built on tradition and formality.

After today's match, he knows I've claimed the seat of honor. It doesn't matter how many years he has on me, or even that he's my Master, I hold a higher-ranking title and he has to respect that.

Especially since that title, *Ryuo*, is one of seven in the world of Shogi that denotes "mastery" of the craft, a title like *Meijin*.

"Now, Master. No, Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, lift up your pants."

"…… *KuzuRyuo*."

"Say what?"

"*Ryuo* my bum, ya piece of trash! Ya got that title out of sheer luck, *KuzuRyuo*!"

F-Frickin' geezer …… Callin' me *trash*, are you ……?!

"That's **Kuzuryu *Ryuo*,** not *KuzuRyuo*, thank you very much! Besides, you're the one that lost!!"

"Some magazine threw this joke of a match together! Wasn't a league match, so it doesn't count!!"

"The match was organized by the best-selling Shogi magazine in the world, *Shogi World*! It carries the same weight as a league match!!

"There are other Shogi magazines out there! Ever heard of *NHK Shogi Kouza* or *Tsume Shogi Paradise*?!"

"Best in the world means best in the world! To the tune of 200,000 in print!!"

Pro, amateur, it doesn't matter. If there's anything you want to know about Shogi, you can find it within its pages: that's *Shogi World* in a nutshell.

"Know what I think? I think you should just own up to losing to your apprentice if it hurts that bad! Stop making excuses!"

"Oh, the paaaiiinnn! Losing to the *KuzuRyuo*, who can't even win thirty percent of his matches, so painfuuul!!"

"Call me trash, one more time old man, one more!!"

"One? I'll go for a hundred, ya *kuzu* trash *kuzu* trash *kuzu* trash *kuzu* TRAAASH!!"

"You're not my Master anymore! I'm expelling you!!"

Master, apprentice, we're done, it's all over! I'm gonna put this geezer in his place! Then take him to the john.

That's when it happened.

"Yaichi."

"Oh! Big Sis!"

A silver-haired, pretty girl with snow-white skin wearing a sailor-style school uniform had been standing quietly behind me the whole time.

Ginko Sora.

I'm older but still have to refer to her like an older sister just because she started before I did, Kiyotaki-*sensei*'s very first apprentice.

"Sis, something ··· anything to hide it! Anything to cover up *Shisho*'s thing!!"

"Here."

"You're the best! Already waiting with—."

I freeze as soon as I see what's in her hand.

It's a lid, the one for the box where the Shogi pieces are kept.

"Too small! Too small any way you look at it!!"

"Big enough to house the King and his Pawns."

"This is no time for dirty jokes!!"

Damnit woman, get me a floor pillow or something before making wisecracks!

"Big Sis! Stop fooling around and do something!!"

"Why don't you join in at the sill, pee along with him?"

"ME?! WHY?!"

"It'll be a funny *Master and apprentice story* someday."

"The hell it will!"

While she and I were yelling at each other like some kind of comedy routine, Master pulls down his pants and,

"HYOOOOOOOOO————————————!!"

A really weird howl, and release.

"Uh-oh!"

"Yaay!"

Other veteran players and *sensei* watching from a safe distance cheer like they're enjoying a show. Please no! Quit cheering and stop him!

"Master! Please, cover that dirty thing! MAAASTEEER!!"

"WWIIIIIZZZ

We'll handle the rest so ···"

"No. We'll finish this ourselves," Ginko said flatly.

The chore of cleaning up all of that splattered urine was still waiting to be done.

"I-I must protest ··· This isn't a job the two of you are meant to do."

"A Master's shame is an apprentice's burden to bear."

"But ···"

The guy kept protesting to the bitter end, but got called away to take care of something else. So the job fell to us in the end anyway and we went back inside the building. The Shogi community is busy again today.

The instant Ginko got a mop and a bucket from another staff member, she turned right around and gave them right to her little brother: none other than me.

"Why only me?!"

"Divvying up duties. I'll go issue an apology for the trouble."

"Oh? As a titleholder, going out in public should be my responsibility—."

"A title? I also have a title."

Yes, she's right. Two of them even, gah ···!

She turns her back to me, sailor skirt twirling at her waist, and says, "I wish to offer a heartfelt apology to everyone affected by today's events. Those wishing to issue a claim, please contact the Japanese Shogi Association Headquarters for further information——."

She finishes with a bow. People passing through stop for a look and start excitedly whispering to each other.

"Hold it! Are you ··· d-don't tell me, Naniwa's Snow White?!"

"..."

"I saw you on TV! Can I have your autograph?!"

Big Sis, surrounded in the blink of an eye. Well, somebody's popular.

"Squee! She's so cute!"

"Wow, Snow White really is snow white!"

All the girls love her. Heeey over there. The Ryuo is right here! Even taking off my glasses doesn't get anyone to notice me.

"Naniwa's Snow White," is Ginko's alias.


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It was started by some Shogi magazine but really took off when there was a piece on TV about her last year. I may have been a junior high pro and the youngest *Ryuo* in history, but I'm constantly hidden in her fame's shadow. Gah ···!

By the way, she doesn't like her alias at all.

Only in junior high school, she said she "doesn't need" the nickname "Naniwa's Snow White" even though it's more recognizable than "Naniwa's Rocky" and "Naniwa's Mozart" here in Osaka. It really rubs her the wrong way: although I'd be willing to bet most people would love to be in her shoes.

It's proof of both her popularity and skill in the world of Shogi. Only real star players get dubbed a nickname. People like *The Man Who's Always 100 Million and Three Steps Ahead in One Second* and *The Early Game Edison* and *Wizard of the Final Curtain* and *Power of Youth* and *Virtuous Advance* and *Crouching Monk* and *Standard Preacher* and *Wood-Chopping Paul Bunyan* and others are spine-chillingly cool. Now you might be thinking: *wood chopping? That's got nothing to do with Shogi! Just wood!* But it strikes a real cord with the more refined Shogi fans.

"Haa ··· Such a pain."

Her impromptu autograph session coming to a close, Ginko opens a parasol and lets out a long sigh.

"The annoying thing about having titles is that these things happen all the time ···"

"Such an embarrassment of riches you have there, Sis."

"Want your head on a pike?"

Oh, and by the way, both her titles are from women-only tournaments.

Six in all. My senior holds "Queen" and "Women's Throne." So "Princess" as an alias but "Queen" as a title: ironic, isn't it (lol)?

Claiming all the titles isn't some far-off dream for someone with her abilities, but she can't with the rules how they are. I'll get into that later, so look forward to it!

"Yaichi, stop twiddling your thumbs and start. Get it over with."

"Take a look around, he wizzed all over the place …"

"Shogi players' hands move before opening their mouths."

Sure, sure. I buck up and start mopping.

"But my word, that incontinent geezer …! How the heck did he hit all the way over there?! How many liters did he spew?!"

"Can't be helped. Everyone drinks lots of water during matches."

It's often said that the body craves sugar when the mind kicks into high gear, but Shogi players tend to find themselves craving something a bit more vital when choosing their next move.

Water.

Some players will bring upwards of five two-liter bottles to their matches and many will drink a whole cup between moves toward the end, meaning a lot of trips to the john.

To be a pro Shogi player is to be in a constant battle with your bladder and, all kidding aside, there's a very real possibility of forfeiting a match because time ran out while in the restroom. I think I've spent enough time talking about pee.

"Apparently, regulation *Go* matches have built-in potty breaks. Now if only the Shogi World would catch on."

"Weak …"

"Huh? You calling me weak, Big Sis? Okay then, what would

you do if you couldn't hold it in anymore?"

"Let it flow."

"……?"

"Wetting yourself is nothing compared to the shame of losing a match, yes?"

She's serious.

"Shogi is a battle of life and death, is it not? It's a duel where only one comes out alive. There's no time to worry about a little pee when your life is on the line."

"You have so much in common with Master, it's amazing."

"Your head, on a pike."

It pains me, but I've got to respect that. What is she, a feudal warlord? A girl like that would dominate the women's Shogi world, no sweat.

Evening was upon us by the time she'd finally given me the okay. Thus, my long affair with the wiz fountain came to an end. And no, there are no bittersweet feelings.

"Yaichi."

Big Sis stops me just as I was about to return the mop and bucket—and wraps her arm around my neck.

"I'll give you … a treat."

"Say what?! A-a treat, from you …? What in the world would —."

"Here you go."

Then she draped something stiff and starchy around my shoulders. Master's suit pants.

"Why the hell would I want this?! What in blazes would I do with it at home?!"

"Take a whiff?"

"Why?! What kind of pervert would take his Master's pants home to enjoy the smell?!"

"It'll be a good memento."

"Memento? Of what?! To induce nightmares about today every time I see them?!"

"The knee."

Ok, that was unexpected. I stop and unfold Master's pants.

The right knee is all wrinkled up but the left is nice and smooth.

"Rather than jumping at the first strategy that comes to mind, Shogi players resist the urge by squeezing their pants. That's why a right-handed player's right pant leg is always wrinkled, same for the left-handed ones but on the opposite side ··· Yes?"

Hearing her say that makes me glance at my own knees.

Sure enough, only the right side is wrinkled.

A Shogi player's gut instincts are right seventy percent of the time. It's pretty common for the first strategy they come up with to carry the day.

But the other thirty percent will snatch defeat from the claws of victory.

Especially when you think to yourself, "It's perfect!" and charge straight ahead without thinking, turning your "perfect idea" into a horrible one. A lot of players end up losing that way every once in a while.

That's why we endure.

Fight off the urge to make the move right away by squeezing our pants and read what's on the board.

All these wrinkles are proof that Master didn't hold anything back during the match. Irrefutable evidence that he took it seriously despite playing against his apprentice.

"… We used to copy that all the time, making these wrinkles."

"… That we did."

"We wanted to be like him so bad that we'd squeeze our right pant leg like he did, even when we weren't playing, just to get the wrinkles."

"And got yelled at right away for ruining our pants."

The two of us force smiles, reminiscing about our younger days when we'd do anything to look like a pro.

Ginko hides her face behind her parasol and says, "… I think Master was happy to play against you. Probably been getting ready for a long time … Put in as much preparation as a league match, just as much focus and determination too. I think he gave you everything he had. So—."

"… Yes. I know he did."

I nodded and give Master's pants a firm squeeze. I can tell by looking at the wrinkles: tell how he felt during our battle and how he felt doing what he did afterward.

Today, one of Shogi's holy sites was blessed with a trickle of holy water.

It could very well have been Master's passionate tears …

⌂ TRASH KUZU RYUO

"So yeah, I'm going home. You take that g— … perfectly wonderful pair of Master's pants with you."

"You were about to call them garbage, weren't you?! These, Master's perfectly wonderful pants, and you're treating them like garbage?!"

"No I'm not."

"Then what were you going to say?!"

"G ··· racias." (Thank you)

Spanish?!

"Um, could we just decide who takes the pants with a game of rock paper scissors? I've got no problem with the wrinkled knee, but there's a really suspicious spot near the groin—."

"Yaichi, tomorrow, are you free?"

"Huh? ··· Well, yeah. I've got a match the day after but not doing much of anything tomorrow."

"Then versus, tomorrow afternoon at your place."

"Versus" is what we call a one-on-one Shogi practice match. Big Sis has moved on, completely blowing off the pants.

"But tomorrow's a weekday, yes? What about school? Going to play hooky?"

"Public school's finished today. Spring break starts tomorrow ··· not that the unemployed Yaichi would know about it."

"Unemployed ···? Pro Shogi player, hello?"

Then again, I didn't go to high school.

A lot of pro Shogi players have been going to high school and college recently, heck, most go to high school. But I became a professional in my third year of junior high, so there wasn't much point in going the academic route. I gave up on it early on and chose this life.

But if I had gone to high school ··· I'd be a junior this year.

There wasn't much for me outside of Shogi anyway, so I don't regret my decision in the slightest. But if you were to ask if I was living the dream, happily playing Shogi every day, I'd say it's not all fun and games ···

"That's fine Big Sis, but these pants—."

"Tomorrow, versus in the afternoon. Forget and you'll end up six feet under."

With that strongly worded salutation, she struts off toward the station with the parasol over her head. I'm all alone, holding Master's pants (stain and all).

"Haaa ····· Might as well head home."

I fold up the pants and stuff them into my second bag, pulling out my smartphone at the same time and turning it on.

Opening up my Internet browser right off the bat, I look at the "Shogi and Chess" message board and scan the list of threads for my name. Right at the top! I'm popular.

'Folding cranes in hopes that *KuzuRyuo* Yaichi Kuzuryu loses the title of *Ryuo*.' 108 pages (30% win rate)

"··· And the list grows."

I couldn't check the message boards because I'm required by rule to turn off my phone before a match, but I'm sure there weren't one hundred pages this morning. I'm really popular ···

Since anyone can see matches online nowadays, the more passionate Shogi fans (?) flood the message boards while watching them in the afternoon. Okay, let's see what they're saying.

'Only the fourth junior high pro and the youngest title holder in history, let's hear what you have to say about the

sixteen-years four-months old Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*, the fastest ever to reach the top of the Shogi World!'

'All his talent got used up in the Ryuo Title Match, piece of trash.'

'Worked real hard for the high stakes Ryuo Title Match to get the green, but doesn't do jack to prepare for anything else, total trash.'

'Got no problem losing to other pros, but no, has to dismantle his Master. Kuzu gives trash a bad name.'

'Just came. How'd the match go? He pulled off Gratitude?'

'Holed up like a badger and slaughtered his Master.'

'Seriously …? Wow, Kuzu's trash.'

'But it wasn't a league match, so the slump continues!'

'I tell you, his matches have been a yawn fest ever since he claimed the title.'

'Got that right. Gives up on a dime, plays defensively and never attacks anymore.'

'All by the books, nothing else. Boring and always loses, worst *Ryuo* ever, *Kuzu Ryuo*.'

'He'll lose the title if this losing streak keeps up all the way to October. Now that'd be legendary.'

'Become the youngest to receive and lose a title ever … The guy's a genius.'

'What'll happen if he loses the title?'

'He was 8-*dan* during the Ryuo Title Match, so you go back to being Yaichi Kuzuryu 8-*dan*.'

'818-*dan*. Lolol'

'That'd outrank Ryuo for sure! Haha.'

'Might as well get back to work folding these cranes, praying that he rises to the great 818.'

··· That's the last one I read before slipping my phone into my pocket. Man, I feel sick ···

My thread exploded right around the Ryuo Title Match, but then turned vicious at the drop of a hat once I took the title.

When I lose, I'm "disgracing the name of Ryuo." But if I win, my play style was "boring." Where is all this hate coming from? If only I knew why.

Meanwhile, people start threads about Ginko called **"'The really cute' Ginko Sora Support Thread 'strongest in history'."** Fans love her. The envy ··· oh, the envy ···

I–Yaichi Kuzuryu, am a professional Shogi player.

Pro Shogi players are members of the "Japan Shogi Association" ··· Basically people who get paid to participate in Shogi matches. Therefore, I'm not unemployed.

Anyone, no matter how old, man or woman, disabled in any way, shape or form can go pro as long as they're good at Shogi. If they're very good, fame and fortune are just a matter of time. But they'll be forced to retire after ten years if not good enough.

Strength is the be-all end-all in the world of Shogi, where only the strongest players survive.

That's pro Shogi, plain and simple.

There is, however, one condition other than strength required to become a professional.

That's having a "Master."

You need someone who's already a professional to take you under their wing before you can become a professional yourself.

This Master-apprentice relationship may be the pillar that holds up the Shogi world ··· And I can't speak for how things are on the outside, but there's no advantage to taking on an apprentice in the world of Shogi.

It's a long-held tradition that Masters receive no awards or payment of any kind for training their apprentices.

I have no idea how many matches Master Kiyotaki has played with me and Big Sis since we became his apprentices back when we were kids, probably tens of thousands. He sacrificed all of that time and energy so that we could improve.

"And I had to go and beat him in a match after everything he's done ···"

I know this Master-apprentice system is necessary to keep the Shogi world healthy and growing, but I can't think of a single good reason to take an apprentice myself. Will the day come when I lose to an apprentice of mine and want to pee out the window ···?

"Well ··· Even if I do take an apprentice, that's still a long way down the road!"

I'm not the only person to hold the title in their teens, but I've never heard of anyone around my age taking an apprentice.

Even if I do take one, that won't be until I'm in my twenties at the earliest and sacrificing my own time to train someone else is the last thing on my mind. 'Can't even take care of himself'—the message boards would have a field day ···

I rode that train of thought all the way home.

I live by myself in the middle of the shopping district just down the street from the Shogi Association Headquarters. The walk doesn't even take ten minutes.

I make my way up past the doors, with no autolock and no elevator in sight, to my room on the second floor of this shabby old apartment building. I open the door and try to stave off the loneliness that accompanies people who live on their own with a happy greeting.

"I'm home! Not that there's anyone here to say hellooooooooooooo?!"

There is.

Someone's here, in this room that should be empty.

A little girl I've never seen before—a girl who looks like an elementary school student no less, is right there, and greets me with a bubbly smile the moment she sees my face.


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"Welcome home! Master!"

…… Come again?

APPRENTICE, BY FORCE

Let's sort a few things out.

There's a little girl in my room, a room that should have been empty, looking at me with sparkling eyes.

An extremely cute girl.

As for age … Probably in elementary school. The backpack over her shoulders is a pretty good hint.

She's sitting on her ankles right in front of me, delicate arms and legs tucked away in perfect posture and staring up at my face with puppy dog eyes in the entrance way. There's a pull-string bag at her side.

Look familiar …? No.

So an elementary school girl who I've never seen before is, for some reason, in my apartment.

I have, by the way, been living in this two-bedroom apartment ever since I graduated from junior high.

One room would've been enough, but I ended up with this one because Big Sis seemed to like it. First of all, I'm not sure why she tagged along on my house hunt at all, but I really don't understand why her opinion carried more weight than mine. It's my place, yeah?

But enough about that.

I need to focus on the grade schooler in front of me right now.

Wait a sec. I've got a funny feeling she said something really

weird just a moment ago ···

"Well, ummm ··· You are? And why are you in my room?"

"Yes! You're Yaichi Ku! Kujuryuryu!"

Stuttering!

"A-are you all right? Your tongue is gonna have a hernia at this rate ···"

"··· I'm aright ···"

Looks painful.

Tears in her eyes, she waits for her tongue to recover and says "Kuju ··· Kuzryu ···" over and over, trying to say my name. Hang in there, kiddo!

Then——.

"Kuhyu ··· Ku ··· Kuju ··· *Sensei*, right?!"

She threw in the towel!!

"That's me, yeah ···"

This might take forever if I took a dig at her now. And forever gets me nowhere. So I just nod.

But I'm surprised.

As the youngest title holder in history, my picture gets circulated all over the Internet. I still get stopped on the street every now and then. *You're that Shogi kid, right? Brighten up, would ya?* Well screw you.

But this little girl just called me by my full name, even adding "*sensei*." That's the first time that's ever happened outside of the Shogi Association, not that she can say my full name, but hey.

That word from a grade schooler I've never seen before is actually quite a shock.

"I'm here to become your apprentice, like you promised!!"

… Huh?

"What? … My apprentice? Come again?"

"Yes! Um … yes!!"

"Me? I made a promise to take you as my apprentice? You?"

"YES!!"

"I did? When?"

"Huh? U-um … last year … during the Ryuo Title Match …"

"…?"

"… Don't you remember?"

Her anxious voice in my ears, I reflect back on that fateful day three months ago, the title match——.

⌂ RYUO TITLE MATCH, 7TH ROUND

Three wins and three losses. The Ryuo Title Match taking place at a high-class Japanese-style inn near a hot spring in Wakura, Ishikawa Prefecture had reached full set, the final match was about to begin.

I won the right to make the first move via the Shogi piece flip, fourth time this match, and I tried to get away from conventional strategy as the title challenger.

The current Ryuo accepted my challenge, choosing to meet me head on. The early game escalated into an unprecedented clash of the titans as we went blow for blow, strength against strength.

Oddly enough, the match took place on December 24th and 25th—Christmas.

Ryuo matches take place all around the country, each requiring two days to complete.

The facilities are usually equipped to seat around 200 people near the live commentary booth, but given the day … They doubted that many would show up.

But their doubts turned out to be groundless.

Ninety-nine percent men, ninety-seven percent wearing glasses. Inside that inn where Ginko, there to provide commentary, said there were "only men in glasses," Shogi nerds from around the country braved the blizzard and Christmas to come together one after another.

About 800 souls, with no need for wives, kids or lovers as long as they had Shogi, united as one like the Shogi gods had bestowed them a Christmas present, their eternal wish to see an extremely entertaining and competitive match that could rewrite history had been granted with a white Christmas backdrop.

"Pro Shogi player declares my offensive advantage in waiting room analysis! But my opponent turns the tables right off the bat!" It was that kind of back and forth match where no one knew who would come out on top.

And then, the final stages.

I was almost out of time when I discovered a way to put the King in check once and for all, but my whole body started shaking. I couldn't stop it.

One more move.

With one move, and this match was as good as mine. I thought it through over and over to make sure. Everything should be in place.

——I won?

Once it hit me, I couldn't make them move.

My fingers were shaking so bad I couldn't pick up the piece.

"…?!"

That had never happened before. Sure, I've been nervous plenty of times, fingers trembled then too. But shaking to the point that I couldn't hold onto one …

Even if I didn't move the piece myself, I could've just said the move and I'd win.

But even that was too much.

"…! ……!!"

No words came out.

I was so nervous that forcing my vocal cords to move was nauseating. I reached for the cup of water at my side in hopes of moistening my throat, but my jittery hand knocked it over.

—Calm down. One move and I've got this.

I stood up, keeping my face as calm as possible. I left the stage looking composed, but sprinted for the toilet once I was out of the room and dove for the sink, heaving.

I barely ate anything for lunch, didn't have much of an appetite, so my stomach was mostly empty. Even with everything out, the nausea didn't go away.

"… Gahh! … Ugh … uphh ……"

I could've counted my remaining minutes on one hand. If I didn't get back soon …

Thinking about it only made me more anxious, eyes spinning as knees gave way. I couldn't even stand up anymore.

—One more move.

—Make one more move, and I become Ryuo …

42 million yen, fame at the top of the Shogi world, advancing to 8-*dan*, were all mine. And my name would forever be etched into Shogi history.

Each one of those thoughts made my stomach roll, my eyes spin.

Not knowing which way was up, I crawled out of the restroom.

Walking back to the arena wouldn't even take thirty seconds. But now, that long hallway may as well have been connected to the moon. My Japanese-style robes were soaked with sweat and heavy as lead.

— … Is time going to run out on me?

Just when I thought it would.

"Um."

Someone spoke to me.

Whoever it was knelt next to my crawling body and said.

"Have some water."

"!!"

A cup of water was held out at my eye level on the floor. That person put hands against my cheek and tilted my head back, letting the water flow into my mouth. That cold water seeped into my entire body.

"Ahh …"

The shaking and nausea were suddenly gone. Like magic.

I'm pretty sure I talked with that person, exchanging a few words after that, but my head was already back at the match. I knew I didn't have much time left.

"… Thanks."

Leaving that word behind, I stepped back into the arena—

And I became the Ryuo.

ENTRANCE TEST

"··· Might you be ··· the one who gave me water?"

"Y-Yes! That was me!"

Nodding her head up and down frenetically, the little girl squeezes her fists just above her knees.

"Is that right?"

····· I don't remember a thing.

Hmmm. Well, I remember talking with somebody, but as for who it was or what we talked about, I don't have a clue.

"And? I promised to make you my apprentice?"

"Well ··· Um. ···"

"Yeah?"

"You didn't ··· use those words exactly but ···"

She's beating around the bush.

Maybe she's twisting my words to fit what she wanted to hear? Maybe what I really said was along the lines of a casual, "Hello, I'll teach you how to play Shogi" type of promise.

"What were my words, exactly?"

"'I'll do whatever you want if I win the title.'"

Promised the world, didn't I?

Did I really say that? Well, yeah, probably. Titles are the most important thing to pro Shogi players. We'd sell our souls to the devil just to get one. Granting some kid's wish would be a piece of cake. Heck, if the Shogi gods came to me and said, "Eat poop and I'll grant you a title," I'd eat it. No question.

But ··· why would she want to be my apprentice of all things?

And I literally just made up my mind *not* to take apprentices just a moment ago.

"Okay. I'll keep my promise."

"Really?!"

"But, only after you take a test."

"Test ···?"

"Because I want to see what you can do," I say and walk to the *tatami* room.

Being an apartment close to the Shogi Association headquarters where a young pro and his senior apprentice often play against each other and host practice sessions, the *tatami* room is the designated Shogi space.

"Please, come in. Sorry about the mess."

"E ··· excuse the intrusion ···"

I point my finger, directing her to one of the floor mats and she cautiously settles in.

Getting a good look at the petrified girl sitting on her ankles, I gotta say, she's really cute.

Yes, she's got a good face, but I can't help but marvel at how polite she is.

Even now, her legs are tucked in nice and tight with her arms folded in her lap. Any Shogi player would be instantly taken with that perfect posture. That's pretty rare among kids nowadays.

"But, how did you get inside? Wait, the door was unlocked, wasn't it?"

"S-Sorry! I just ···"

A young pro hangs around here; the door is usually unlocked so

that anyone can drop in whenever they please. The only thing inside worth stealing would be my Shogi board. Trying to carry that thing out of here would stick out like a sore thumb too.

"And ··· I thought ··· Waiting outside might cause trouble for you ···"

"Good point."

Imagine what my neighbors would think if they saw some strange little girl standing outside my door. What a considerate girl! I already get warnings for "strange clicking sounds at all hours of the night" from neighbors ···

"Anyway, must've been really hard, figuring out where I live?"

"Your address was written on the *Thank You* postcard you sent out to my family's inn, *Sensei*."

"Ahh, now that you mention it–."

I remember sending cards to a lot of people after becoming Ryuo because Master told me to.

"Huh? In that case, your parents own that inn?"

"Yes! My name is Ai Hinatsuru, from the Hot Spring Inn: "Hinatsuru"! I'm in the third gra ··· ah, fourth grade this spring!"

"So ··· a third grader."

"I'm nine! I'll turn ten this year!"

Really, her age is surprising.

Manners like that and still only in single digits ···

"That's quite a trip, from your family's Inn all the way here. You came by yourself?"

"Yes! I took the *Thunderbird* train."

The Thunderbird, an express line that connects Osaka with the northern coast. If I remember right, it's a straight shot from

Hinatsuru to Osaka station. No need to change trains even once along the way.

Then it's just one stop on the Kanjou Line from Osaka station to get here. Not that much of an adventurer ··· But still.

"You must have some really nice parents, letting you travel like this."

"Y-Yes! They ··· are very ··· understanding ···"

"They ··· what now?"

Suddenly, I get the feeling that she's beating around the bush again...

Considering they lent out their facility for the title match, her parents must love Shogi. Maybe they really buy into that "Let your darling children travel" type of thinking.

"Yeah, but still. I would've liked a heads up that you are coming all this way. Nearly jumped out of my shoes when you showed up out of nowhere."

"Um ··· I-I-I wrote a letter asking you to take me as an apprentice, but without any reply ···"

"..."

I take a very awkward glance toward the mailbox on my front door. It's practically bursting at the seams with envelopes and junk mail.

Emptying the thing out would be such a pain in the ass ··· The association always contacts me by email so ···

"Y-you did? Sorry about that. Yeah."

Well, in the end it doesn't matter if this girl is lying or not.

I have no intention of making her my apprentice either way.

And I highly doubt that I, a teenager at heart, could properly

raise one. I don't have time to worry about anyone else. And I sure as hell don't want to pee on the floor after losing to an apprentice.

I'll find another way to keep my promise, but I have to get her to give up on this apprentice thing first.

"Now then."

I take my Shogi board out from the closet and place it in front of Ai Hinatsuru.

"Th-this is a really nice board!"

"Be gentle with it, okay? I'm still paying off the loan."

Together with the Shogi pieces, the whole thing cost about as much as a new car.

It's about eight-and-a-half inches thick, plus the four legs holding it up, so it's tall enough to hide almost half the grade school girl sitting on her ankles when put directly in front of her.

Now that Ai is physically intimidated, it's about time to intimidate her mentally.

"I'm a professional Shogi player. Pros can only take on apprentices capable of becoming pros themselves one day."

That's not necessarily true, but she doesn't need to know that now.

"So, I need to see if you have that much talent with my own eyes. Okay?"

That's a pretense.

Sure, I may be only winning thirty percent of my matches and in the middle of an eleven-game skid, but I'd never lose to a grade schooler. It may be a little harsh, but I'll beat her, making her cry and give up on the whole thing. That's the plan.

"Since I need to know exactly what you can do, we'll play

without any handicap."

"Sure! Ready when you are!!"

What's this? I thought to myself.

Even under all this pressure, this girl sits up straight and replies with a beaming smile.

Her mettle and posture pass with flying colors.

The windows should be closed, but it feels like a soft breeze blew through the room just now.

☖ AIGAKARI (DOUBLE WING ATTACK)

We pull the amber brown pieces out of the box and start setting them up on the board one by one.

Just by looking at how fluid her movements are, it's pretty easy to guess about how much experience the girl has playing Shogi.

The little girl sitting here: Ai Hinatsuru's dexterity is, "This there ··· And that one there!" ··· in a word, hapless.

With no sense of the proper etiquette, she's just setting them as fast as she can. It's probably just nerves, but she's having trouble keeping the pieces inside the lines on the board. This match is in the bag.

Pieces in place, I say, "You may have the first move."

"Okay! R-ready to start when you are!!"

"As am I."

The match begins as we both lower our heads.

Now then, how does she play?

"Heep, haaa ····· aa!"

Ai takes a deep breath and puckers her lips, concentrating with

all her might and moves the *fu* (Pawn) in front of her *hisha* (Rook) one space forward.

"Ohh? A static style?"

There are two main styles of Shogi, the "Static Rook" and "Ranging Rook."

In layman's terms, the "static" style is for people who like to plan everything logically, step by step. The blood type "A" personality if you will. "Ranging" is for people who like to rely on their gut feelings, a type "B." Sis and I are static, by the way. Our Master is too, so that's probably why he's pretty particular about it, much more so than his choice of restrooms.

So I respond by mirroring her move, moving the Pawn in front of my Rook one space forward.

Third move. In no time at all, Ai presses her finger onto the same piece, moving it another space forward with authority.

This is——.

"… Double Wing Attack?"

During the seventh Ryuo title match, the one played at Ai's family's inn, I played the same style.

Both players lead with the Pawn in front of their Rook, the simplest and most aggressive pattern there is but furthest from standard strategy. It's like both players are sitting ducks, throwing axes at each other.

That's a Double Wing Attack.

So this elementary school girl is challenging the Ryuo to a contest of strength … Okay.

"How weak does she think I am …?"

The words come tumbling out of my mouth before I realize it

as I move my own pawn another space forward.

Shogi is dialogue.

There's a saying like that.

Shogi players aren't just pushing pieces around. Once they reach a certain level, having a conversation over the board becomes second nature.

"I'm confident my strength is enough! Please don't hold anything back!"

"Know your place, cheeky kid ··· All right then. I'll play along. Bring it!"

Our past four moves went a little like that.

There is no standard strategy for Double Wing Attack. We're already in uncharted territory.

As expected, I took a big lead in the early stages. Using subtle movements and a pro's insight, I tear her front line to shreds and start advancing on her King.

"Ah ··· ugh ···"

Ai, pinned down and groaning, is on the verge of tears.

Completely skipping over the middle stages, I move to finish this as quickly as possible. Happens all the time in Double Wing Attacks.

"That's it."

Getting a good handle on what my opponent is capable of, I try to think of the fastest way to put the nail in the coffin and position my pieces to go in a no-holds-barred overkill style. I drive her King all the way back to the last row with my heavy hitting pieces just to make sure victory is mine. Then, I hit the *gin* (Silver).

And of course, Ai raises her defenses against such an onslaught.

She should.

But——.

"…… Here …… Here …… Here ……"

"Huh?"

"… Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here ……"

As soon as she saw my move, the girl about to cry suddenly had fire in her eyes.



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“ Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here,here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here,

midair, nose floating just above the pieces on the board, her whole body ticking back and forth like a metronome and she starts whispering to herself.

——Stop now of all times? No way …

Did she figure out my attack was coming in too strong? Then again, I highly doubt this girl has the skill to hold off a professional's advance. This match is as good as over.

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehere …… Uh-huh!!"

Sitting up and more determined than ever, the tiny girl leans over the large Shogi board, reaches all the way out with her hand, and moves a piece into place. A sharp snap of wood on wood fills the room, echoing higher and higher.

"Huh?"

Sound dribbles out of my mouth the moment I see the move Ai chose to make. It wasn't to shore up her defense.

Instead—she moved *to attack*.

That move sends a shockwave across the board that shatters my false sense of security and nearly blew the skin off my cheeks.

"…?!"

It looked like a horrible move at first glance.

Answer an attack with an attack? That should blow up in her face.

It's like she knew that my attack would come up just short, a slash that sent a chill down my spine.

"?! … That can't be right!"

The more I read what's on the board, the attack I thought

would "never happen" felt more and more like a dagger aimed at my throat.

"Sacrificing the Knight to take the Silver and put me in check, eh? But if I retreat the King to 6-1 position, the Rook at 4-7 will take the Silver at 6-2 … That's checkmate if the King is there?! And if the Gold goes in, she'd move the Bishop to 8-3 will take it and then put me in check at the same time?! W-what is this girl?"

How far ahead did she plan this out?!

I look up without even thinking and behold the girl seated across from me.

She doesn't notice my staring eyes. Instead, she's bent over like a sprinter in mid-race with her eyes glued to the board, body still ticking back and forth.

"…… Hereherehereherehereherehereherehere ……"

Eyes racing back and forth over the board and no words, only sounds coming out of her mouth, I can tell that she's playing out a vast number of scenarios and sequences in her mind at an incredible speed.

She's transcended the board itself.

Thoughts like strengthening her defense and trying to win my favor haven't even crossed her mind.

"This girl is!"

Ai Hinatsuru is trying to kill me!!

That thought sends a shiver down my spine.

I'm not scared of the idea that an elementary school girl might beat me. Just the opposite. It's the joy a Shogi player who has spent years researching the true way to play feels when confronted with something completely new on a Shogi board.

And it's the happiness a competitor feels when presented with a worthy challenge.

"So you know what you're doing after all."

I lick my lips, slip on my special match glasses, and go on the attack with everything I've got.

There's no going back. I can't go back.

Ai's not going to retreat. A passion, an enthusiasm I didn't think a cute girl like this was capable of forced my verbal jab in one ear and out the other.

"··· Here, here, hereherehereherehere——Uh-huh!!"

The little assassin sits up and reaches out with her eyes open wide, firing her Bishop at my King like a cannonball. Of course, I return fire. It's kill or be killed. It will be over the instant someone even thinks about defending.

A no-guard slugfest.

The wooden clicks get louder, each of us predicting faster and faster as we trade blows in a blood-soaked brawl.

I forgot that the person in front of me was a little girl in grade school at some point and crushed her heart with everything I had.

REVIEW SESSION

"····· I lost."

Hearing those words, I was dumbstruck.

How much stronger Ai was in the late game than I thought she'd ever be!

Above all I was dumbstruck by how much fun I had during the whole thing.

I haven't had such a sweet and stimulating time since facing a top-top class pro in a Double Wing Attack in the Ryuo title match.

No one can play Shogi alone, obviously.

So a *meikyoku,* a match worth remembering, can never happen if either player is much stronger or much weaker than the other.

Both strategies have to clash at full force, both players keep the big picture in mind and continue making the best possible moves so that the victor is decided by the slimmest of margins and the defeated gracefully accepts their fate like a badge of honor.

That's what a great match requires.

This match wasn't one. It was too chaotic to qualify for that name.

However, no matter how highly skilled the players—even pros using the latest research—there is such a thing as a boring match of Shogi. A kind of match that cools the heart.

On the other hand, there are some matches that completely ignore the latest research and throw the standard style out the window to become a perverse variation of the game. That, along with crummy matches where both players make mistakes left and right, tend to get the audience fired up.

Just like words that remain unsaid, a style of Shogi that remains unplayed, no matter how much preparation has gone into it, can never inspire people.

Shogi matches that ignite the soul—where both players put their "hearts" into every move—have courage, fighting spirit, pride, but also fear, tenacity, will, passion, hope, despair and grit. They make the soul burn brighter and brighter.

And Ai's Shogi reminded me what that feels like.

That Shogi could be this intense. That it was this much fun.

Losing became scary once I had the weight of *Ryuo* on my shoulders and started caring what was written on the Internet as well as what other people thought. For someone like me who avoided confrontation, choosing to play the safe way even against his own Master, it's been ages since feeling this heat, since I enjoyed playing this much.

Numbed by eleven consecutive losses, my spirit is shaking, burning to the very core. Something is flickering in my chest, I can feel it.

"Uh, um ···"

A nervous voice brings me out of my stunned train of thought at the end of the match.

"*S-* ··· *Sensei,* um ···"

"Look here."

"Huh?"

"What would you have done if I made this move?"

"Oh, well, um ··· this."

Going back a few moves, we say what we were thinking at the time.

It's a study method unique to Shogi called a "review session."

Even pros don't always make the best moves.

Time and endurance are limited, so the winner is decided by who made the least number of mistakes. We're human after all.

"*Shogi is a game where the one who made the last mistake loses.*"

There's a reason for this saying.

But we can relax during these review sessions, relive the match

and see what the best move was without the pressure. We can pursue true Shogi without all the restrictions. It's the most fun part of playing for me. A bit irritating after a loss though.

"··· I see. You're pretty strong."

Confirming Ai's ability to read the board, I'm impressed by her strength in the late game once again.

"Your early and mid-game strategy could use some work, but you have an excellent feel for the late game. You've also got a knack for choosing when and how to attack."

"N-no, not really ··· um, thank you so much ··· Hehe♡"

"Do you do Double Wing Attacks often?"

"Often ··· well, actually, um ···"

Ai shyly drops her head and quietly makes a shocking confession.

"This is ··· the only way I know how ·····"

"Say what?!"

Blushing, Ai leans forward to hammer her point home even as I shriek in disbelief.

"I saw your title match in person and was amazed! So I started playing Shogi myself! I wanted to play like you, Sensei, so I copied your style."

"Hold up! ··· What? So what you're saying is ···?"

Her proclamation throws me for a loop.

The only opening formation she knows is the Double Wing Attack? So her only starting move is to advance the Pawn in front of the Rook? She's that new to Shogi? What if her opponent used a Ranging Rook style?

No, before that: *she started playing after seeing my title match*

··· right?

"So, then ··· you've only been playing for three months?"

"U-um ··· Yes. Sorry ···"

She must think I'm scolding her, giving a dejected apology like that.

No, no, no, no, no. This is ··· almost headline news.

A grade school girl who started playing Shogi three months ago challenged the *Ryuo* to a match with no handicap is an incident in and of itself, but the more startling news is that a grade schooler (practically a beginner) with the ability to put the *Ryuo* against the ropes in the late game even exists.

"Um ··· *Sensei*?"

"Eh? Oh, what is it?"

"M-My ··· My test ··· um ···"

Eyes getting wetter by the moment, she keeps looking up at me only able to say "um" over and over.

"Test?"

"To be ··· um, your apprentice ···"

"Oh, right."

That's what this was. Her entrance test. That's right, that's right.

I was going to turn her down either way, and completely forgot about it.

"Hmmm. Let's see ···"

Pretend to think really hard, taking her as an apprentice or not didn't really seem to matter much anymore.

I just wanted to keep playing Shogi with this girl.

"I still don't know enough to make a decision. So how about

another match for now?"

"P-Please!!"

Her face brightening in the blink of an eye, Ai cheerfully starts lining up pieces.

Time absolutely flew by from there, the two of us continued to play Shogi without stopping to eat anything.

Until dawn. All the way through the night.

RECORD 2

Ai Hinatsuru

雛鶴あい



DATE OF BIRTH:	OCTOBER 7TH (9 YEARS OLD)
BLOOD TYPE:	AB
HOMETOWN:	NANAO CITY, ISHIKAWA PREFECTURE
CLASS:	THIRD YEAR CLASS 2
FAVORITE FOODS:	CRAB, BUTTERED RICE
TALENTS:	COOKING (ESPECIALLY CURRY!)
	HOUSEHOLD CHORES
	SHOGI PUZZLES

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"… Uh …… nh …?"

Chop, chop. Slice, slice. Those noises woke me up.

"… That smell … miso soup?"

My confused and groggy mind can't process the domestic aromas wafting into my nose.

Huh? Where … am I?

"…… Did I spend the night at Master's place? Is that Keika in the kitchen ……?"

Just when I thought I was dreaming about my years of training, turns out that wasn't it.

The bedroom ceiling of my two-bedroom apartment greets my eyes when I open them, the smartphone next my pillow tells me it's almost noon.

"Oh yeah …… I played Shogi late into the night last night, didn't I ……"

Playing into the wee morning hours, practically dawn, of course my opponent started nodding off at some point and I vaguely remember coming to bed.

And, that opponent was–.

"Ah! Master, good morning!"

One step out of my room and her greeting hits me like it was shot out of a cannon.

An elementary school girl wearing an apron is standing in the kitchen.

"……"

This is important, so it bears repeating.

Kitchen! Wearing an apron!! Elementary school girl!!! Standing there!!!!

"… Umm."

"I'm Ai! Ai Hinatsuru! Your apprentice since yesterday!"

"Huh? Nah, I don't remember ever saying anything like that—."

"Breakfast is almost ready! Master, please take a bath while you wait!"

"A-a bath?"

The grade schooler pushes me down the hallway toward the bathroom where the tub has already been filled with hot water.

Living on my own, I only take showers anymore. This might be the first time I've ever taken it slow and enjoyed a bath at home. Plus—.

"Smells really good in here …"

"Yes! Because I brought Wakura bath salts from home. We use the same kind at our inn! It'll energize you and make you feel really good too ♪"

That's right, her parents own an inn with a hot spring …

Calling it an "inn" might not do the place justice. I've got a feeling it's more like a high-class hotel. I mean, I'm pretty sure someone said it won "Best in Japan" awards for years running and something was mentioned before we left about the emperor staying there for an informational meeting.

Hold up?

Wouldn't that make her … royalty or something?

"Please put your clothes in this basket. I'll wash them for you later. I'll put a towel and some fresh clothes for you here, okay?"

"Ah, sure."

And before I knew it, the grade schooler figured out where I keep my clothes and towels. This is clearly way out of the ordinary, but I'm too groggy for it to set in.

It's like I'm back at the inn, the title match all over again! I think to myself while relaxing in an absolutely perfect hot bath. My morning surprises continued upon exiting the bathroom door.

"Master! Your food is ready!"

"Ah, sure."

"I'll set out the plates, okay?"

Feeling like royalty myself after taking a bath with the sun still high in the sky, I take a seat at the knee-high dining table in the *tatami* room and watch simple yet hot dishes land in front of me one after another. This couldn't have been easy to put together. Her otherworldly household skills are jaw dropping.

Sitting on her heels like some highly-trained server at a traditional inn, she starts scooping rice into a bowl and says, "I need to say sorry. I used almost everything in the refrigerator without asking."

"That's fine by me …"

I take the bowl from her, still in awe of all the food lined up in front of me. It's a feast.

"This is amazing. You made all this by yourself?"

"Yes! The refrigerator had lots of stuff in it, and I kept getting new ideas and made a lot of food."

"What's this black sauce here?"

"It's seaweed! Seaweed boiled in soy sauce."

"I don't remember having any of that in the fridge."

"I made it. Sheets of seaweed and seasoning were already

there."

"Say what?! You can make this stuff?!"

"With a frying pan, yes?"

"O-oh, I see …… I'll, um, have some...."

"It's really easy to make, so no need to worry."

I keep my eyes glued on the grade schooler sitting on her heels, lowering her head in a slight bow as I reach for the food with my chopsticks.

Now then, how about the taste—.

"Whoa! This is delicious. You're something else, kiddo?!"

"E-he-he♡."

I compliment her and Ai makes this really happy, puppy-dog smile.

She's nothing like the timid little thing she was yesterday.

This is probably how she normally is. You can tell what someone's really like after playing Shogi with them. This girl is actually rather persistent about getting her way, not willing to make any compromises. On the attack, 100 percent. Then again, female Shogi players are pretty much all that way like Big Sis, and Big Sis, and Big Sis.

"Huh? Ai, aren't you going to eat anything?"

"No, no! I shall serve you, Master! I'm your apprentice after all!"

"Don't worry about that. Now come on, have a seat and eat with me. You've gotta be hungry!"

If she does any more for me, *I'm* the one who's gonna feel awkward. And she's not my apprentice.

"Okay … Um, I'll eat with you then …"

"Good."

Sitting down on the opposite side of the table, we start eating face to face.

"……"

"……"

… Something's a bit odd.

Facing each other like this is kinda awkward … And no, nothing's happening downstairs because I'm this close to being a grade schooler myself, okay? It's all nerves, got it? You understand, right?

All Shogi players know what it's like to be perfectly fine sitting across from the opposite gender around a board but still turn into a nervous wreck otherwise. Even if that person happens to be in elementary school …

"Um … Master? I was wondering, do you cook? There was a lot of food in the fridge."

"Huh? Ohh. Not me, but Big Sis does …"

"Sister? Master, do you have an older sister?"

"Older sister … Meh. Something like that, yes."

Saying that she's "practicing for when she lives on her own," Ginko comes to my place and tries (her best) to cook. Her cooking (or something resembling it) isn't even fit for a dog, but she comes after me, brandishing my eight-and-a-half inch Shogi board over her head if I don't eat it, so I end up trying to swallow. 'Cause after all, my head would split open like a watermelon if she actually threw it at me. And I'm still paying off the loan.

"But enough about that … Didn't you say you started playing Shogi three months ago? How did you pick it up so fast?"

"Oh, okay."

Ai rests her hand on the table and straightens her posture.

"Before he died, grandpa... my grandfather really liked Shogi and kept a lot of books about it at my family's inn. I read them to learn as much as I could. But I can't understand when there are a lot of hard words.

"That's all?"

"And I would solve Shogi puzzles between chores at home. We run an inn with a hot spring, so there's always so much to do. So I spent most of my spare time solving those puzzles."

Now I get it. Shogi puzzles, makes sense. That explains her strong late game.

It's not like anyone who does Shogi puzzles will get good at the game. Some of the authors don't actually play themselves. That being said, they might've been perfect for this girl.

"But I'm really impressed. Finding time to study Shogi between chores like that."

You'd think that a kid would get scolded for playing Shogi in the middle of housework, but pros have a different way of looking at it. In our world, if you've got time to do schoolwork, you should be playing Shogi.

"E-he-he. I had a real hard time remembering the problems at first, but I can do it now!"

What? Remembering ··· the problems?

"··· Hang on a sec. Are you memorizing them? Wouldn't it be easier to carry books and copies with you?"

"Yes. I, um, used to do that but my mother found them.... But it's okay because I don't forget a puzzle once I memorize it. Mom

can take away as many as she likes!"

"If, if you don't mind me asking … How many do you memorize in one sitting?"

"Maybe thirty? Then again, only ten if they're long ones."

Whoa, whoa, whoa …

It was surprising enough that she was solving puzzles on a mental Shogi board, but memorizing thirty puzzles at once? To top it all off, she doesn't forget a single one? What is this girl's mind made of …?

"S … so what kind of puzzles? Like Three Move Check?!"

"This is one I just worked out."

She goes to her backpack that's sitting in the corner of the room and brings back an old book. *Shogi Zukou* is written on it.

"The last problem really gave me fits, couldn't solve it no matter what I tried. But it finally clicked during the train ride here! It was really hard."

"D … Did you …… Did you really … solve … this …?"

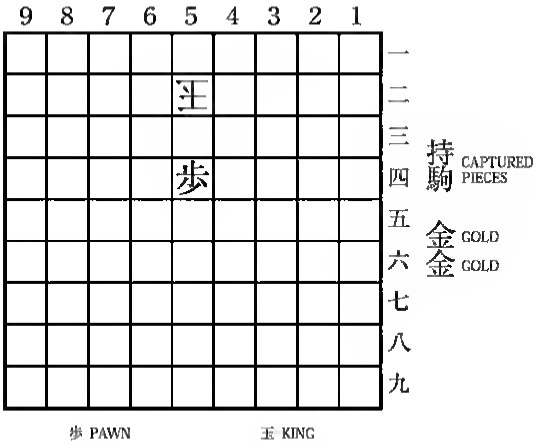
"611 moves, right?"

… That's correct. She's for real?

The *Shogi Zukou* is a collection of extremely difficult Shogi puzzles, kind of like brainteasers, written in the 1700s by a pro named Kanju Itou.

100 puzzles in all, each of which is considered a classic in its own right. But the last three—Naked King, Fog of War and Longevity—are far more difficult than the rest and have been praised as the best puzzles in history, their difficulty bordering on artistic. They're far beyond a level that, after solving one, a grade schooler could say, "It was really hard. Period."

Just for reference, this is a normal (Three Move Check) Shogi puzzle.





And this is the last problem in *Shogi Zukou*, called Longevity.

It borders on profane, am I right?

Like a really bad joke.

These are Shogi puzzles. Even that one …

And a grade schooler solved it, all 611 moves, without using a board …

"This book took me about two weeks to finish, but it was a lot of fun! I'd like to write one of these books of my own someday♪"

A cold chill ran down my spine just looking at that innocent grade schooler's happy smile.

She's …… not normal.

Her talent clearly isn't something you see every day. It takes pro Shogi players a few months to work their way through *Shogi Zukou*. There used to be a time when solving *Zukou* and solving another really difficult book known as *Shogi Musou* were enough to be recognized as a pro.

And this girl with three months' experience solved it in just two weeks while helping out at home ……

Ai gets a bit nervous watching me zone out in shock,

absentmindedly mixing the seaweed paste into my rice and she timidly speaks up.

"Um ··· Master? Was two weeks ··· too much time ···?"

The other way around.

"W-well ··· I'd have to say it's quite an accomplishment for an amateur. But the average pro can solve these puzzles at a glance."

"··· I knew it."

"Longevity here takes 611 moves, but it was created more than 200 years ago. Modern puzzles take a lot more than that to crack."

"How many?"

"For starters, Micro-Cosmos takes 1,525 moves."

"What?"

"1,525."

"T-th ··· That's crazy ···!"

"All of us pros have figured it out."

If I were Pinocchio, my nose would be past Abeno Harukas about now.

"Pro Shogi players are really amazing!"

Careful to avoid the grade schooler's sparkling gaze of admiration, I ask a follow-up question.

"····· And? Have you done any other practice methods?"

"Let me think. Would playing online at school count?"

"Shogi online?"

"24 and Wars, games like that."

Shogi Club 24 and Shogi Wars, eh? Pretty basic.

"I'd borrow smartphones or tablets from my friends and we'd play during recess. Then I'd think about our matches during class and figure out what moves I should have made."

Oh, ho? Played Shogi on a tablet at school, did you?

Times have really changed … I don't want to sound like a geezer, I'm a teenager after all, but it's been a year since I left school. It's all so nostalgic now …

"… The food was delicious."

"Thank you so much! Oh! Would you like some tea?"

She takes dishes away while preparing hot tea. This girl thinks of everything.

After pouring tea into cups, like she's been doing it for years, Ai quickly and efficiently washes the dishes before coming up to me and says, "Excuse me, Master. Um, would it be all right for me to take a bath now …?"

"Yeah, sure. Take your time … And I'm not your Master yet, you know?"

"I know, Master!!"

My shoulders slump, disheartened by the happy little voice echoing out from the bathroom.

VERSUS

I give the "apprentice" matter some more thought while sipping tea.

Talent … Yeah, she's got it.

All because she can learn how to "end" a Shogi match from doing all those puzzles.

This combination … I just saw it in a puzzle!

That's useful in a seminar sort of way. If you can get to the point where your gut tells you where the opportunities are, then

you can reach victory much faster than your opponent.

That's strength in the endgame.

Whereas normal people can only get a feel for it with the puzzles, Ai can combine all of that knowledge and accurately recall each situation with that incredible memory of hers.

So, basically, that girl ··· gets stronger with every match she plays, with every puzzle she solves.

If someone were to ask me if she'd make it in the world of women's Shogi I'd have to say, "Yeah, she would. Plain and simple."

More specifically, she'd win titles if trained properly. I only know a few women with the kind of talent she has.

The icing on the cake—.

Only been playing for three months ···

Ai's nine right now.

A little too old for Shogi players aiming to be the best to start.

Most pro players knew the rules before starting elementary school and would begin their hardcore training right about now.

Ai's way behind where my Big Sis, Ginko Sora—a two-title holder in the Women's League—was at her age in terms of game knowledge.

Then again, Big Sis is a freak who knew the rules like the back of her hand when she was only two years old. I can't deny that for Ai, growing this much in three months, means there's a possibility she has more hidden potential than Big Sis. Women tend to start later in the pro Shogi world than men do anyway.

If someone asked me if I'd want to train her, I'd have to say, "Of course I'd want to."

She has distinguished talent.

And her personality: her competitive nature and her will to win leave nothing to be desired. A mighty fine cook too. Judging by the humming noises coming from the tub, I bet she's got a great singing voice as well.

Add in her angelic good looks, and she's got all it takes to become the Shogi world's idol in no time. Shogi might get a million new fans just because of her.

And, to put it bluntly: I wanna see what that kind of talent can do on a Shogi board.

··· Just not as her Master.

That's right.

How could I, the *Kuzu Ryuo,* who can't even look after himself, take care of a grade schooler, a *girl* at that?

Taking her on as an apprentice is out of the question. For her sake, too.

So who do I leave her to ···? Hmm, who would be good? Someone I know on the north coast—?

Just when that thought crossed my mind.

Ding dong ♪

The doorbell goes off.

"Heeello? Who is it?"

"Me."

"Who?"

"Me."

Big ··· Sis ···?!

"DAHHH

Go! Run like the wind!!

I race to the front door and grasp the knob with both hands.

She's got a spare key, so she'd come in with or without my permission. Heck, she'd come in if I weren't home if she wanted to. Since she's usually playing Shogi at all hours of the day, I've actually given up on telling her to stay out so I don't care.

But not today!! Not when there's a grade school girl in my tub!!

"W-Why'd you come all the way out here, Big Sis?! D-d-d-do you need to talk to me?!"

"Versus."

"Was that todaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!!?"

Yesterday, we talked about it before going home! I completely forgot! But so much has happened!! A grade school girl showed up!!

"Hurry up and open the door. It's hot."

Her angry voice makes my heart beat faster. Naniwa's Snow White has really sensitive skin and hates being outside in the sun.

"Um, right now … I'm still … preparing ……"

"Say what?"

Great, now she's angry *and* suspicious.

"Y-You know! I've been on a real skid recently, right!? Though I hate to admit it myself!"

"And?"

"And I thought I'd try out some new strategies for our versus today! So, um, it's taking longer than I thought, doing this and that to get ready."

"I don't care if you want to try Cheerful Central Rook or the

Rook Corner Exchange strategies. Why does that mean I have to wait outside?"

"Umm ··· Because they're not ready ···"

What am I supposed to say? *Because there's a nine-year-old girl in my tub!?* And now she's driving me into a corner—I'm already in check!

Closing and left and right, Big Sis says, "··· Yaichi, are you taking a bath?"

She can probably hear the water running outside. The tub is right next to the entrance.

"Y-Yes, I am. Th-Th-That's why! I can't open the door!!"

If Big Sis saw some unknown grade schooler in the tub, she'd probably murder me before I could come up with an excuse. I'd either be bludgeoned with my eight-and-a-half inch Shogi board or have tons of pieces shoved into my mouth, eyes, nose, ears and up my butt before sinking to the bottom of the river ·····

"Oh. You're in the bath."

"Y-Yeah ···"

"That's a relief."

"Huh?"

"··· I thought you hated me for a moment."

"Big Sis ···"

I highly doubt she'd be *relieved* to know I had a nine-year-old girl stay overnight and that she's currently in the tub, but Big Sis can say the cutest things sometimes.

Then again ··· About half of what I said was true.

Going pro in October the year before last, once I fought my way out of Group 6 (the lowest ranking group in the Ryuo

Tournament) and had gained fame by taking out established strong players one after another, I rose from the bottom all the way to the top of the Shogi world before I knew it.

Not only was I the youngest ever to claim a title at sixteen years and four months old, I was also the fastest title winner, winning it one year and two months after my pro debut. I went from 4-*dan* all the way to 7-*dan* thanks to participating in the Ryuo Tournament and I was promoted to 8-*dan* when I won. And, of course, I was the youngest and fastest to ever pull that off. Most pro Shogi players work their way up the ladder for thirty years before retiring at 7-*dan*. I surpassed all of them in a single year. A Ryuo Tournament dream come true. Cup noodles were Ryuo flavor. Even the noodles at the Yamagi Soba Noodles Restaurant across the road from the association headquarters tasted like Ryuo. Yay.

That's when all hell broke loose.

Three months after becoming Ryuo, I haven't won a single regulated match. That's eleven in a row and counting. My winning percentage has fallen all the way to the thirties. The dream has become a nightmare.

You see, I finally figured it out. I only won the Ryuo tournament *because I was weak*.

"Yaichi …," Big Sis was waiting while I reflected on my progress and how I could explain my need to develop new strategies.

There wasn't much information on me at all since I'd only just turned pro, and no one expected me to win. So they didn't take me seriously. Meanwhile, I was dissecting my opponents' playing

styles and coming up with all sorts of strategies. Ranking near the bottom let me try all sorts of *uncool* moves without worrying about anything. I ended up playing from behind all the time—probably pissed off a lot of my opponents because I refused to throw in the towel ……

But everything changed once I became Ryuo.

My playing style was thoroughly analyzed, making me a sitting duck. Everyone started going after my exposed weaknesses without a shred of mercy.

But that's not all. I started getting a lot of attention, being on top of the Shogi world and all, and fans expected me to play a dignified *classy* style worthy of my title.

"So that's why I need to develop new strategies. I need play like a Ryuo, play the perfect game that no one can criticize—."

"Yaichi."

"Yeah?"

"This losing skid isn't because you're weak. You aren't weak at all. It's that—."

Just as Big Sis was about to say something.

"Master. Could you get me a towel?"

Ai popped out of the tub with amazing timing.

Water dripped from her wet hair and a smile was plastered on her face. She was stark naked. Growing up at a hot spring, it's like she was saying, "*I've got no problem going all natural♪*"

Well, I've got a problem with it!

"Hey!? What the hell! Why'd you come out in the buff?!"

"Sorry (>_<)"

Like she forgot to bring a towel! Like some kind of off-handed

comment. Freak out a bit! You're naked, act like it!!

"…… Was that a girl's voice?" Big Sis asked.

"N-no-no-no-no-no-not at all?! M-must be the TV?"

"You don't have a TV, Yaichi."

"Master? Is there someone outside?"

"Nope, no one at all!!"

I yell loud enough for Big Sis on the outside and Ai on the inside to hear me. Then—.

"……"

Rustling noises come from the other side of the door.

Oh no! Big Sis is getting out her spare key?!

"There's nobody! I'm the only one in here!"

I scream with my hands braced against the lock and doorknob.

"Um, Master? What're you doing there?" she asks, finding it strange that I'm hanging out by the front door.

She's in her birthday suit.

"D-Don't worry about that! Just please grab a towel and put some clothes on!"

"But the floor'll get all wet."

"That's fine! It can be wet! Oh, once you get dressed grab your things and hide in the closet, okay!?"

"Huuh? Why should I hide?"

Click! Click! Click! WHAM!!

"Yaichi! Let go of the door!? The bath was a lie, wasn't it!! Open up!!"

"EEEEEEEEK!!"

"Master? Is someone here for you?"

"No, well, you see."

"····· Is it a girl?"

Her voice just dropped an octave. That's ··· kinda scary.

"Master! Who is it!? What is she to you!? And look at me when you talk!!"

"I can't! Because you're buck naked!!"

"Buck naked!! There's a naked girl in there!?"

The end is near.

"Look at me!" Ai yells and pulls at my arm, tripping me to the floor just as Big Sis opens the door–.


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This happened. This is checkmate.

"Yaichi ····· Who's this? This little girl ·····?"

"Master!? Who is this other woman!?

I'd give up right here and now if we were playing Shogi, but there is no "give up" option or reset button in life, as unfortunate as it is. This game royally sucks.

⌂ BENEATH A SHOGI BOARD

"··· Like I've been saying this whole time. This is all just an unfortunate accident, I've done nothing indecent! Nothing at all!"

I desperately try to explain, sitting on my heels in the *tatami* room (no floor cushion).

Big Sis says, "And?"

"*And?* Big Sis, are you really listening? I didn't invite this girl inside, she just came in! Unannounced! By herself! From the north coast!"

"And?"

"You see, it's like this! She's the daughter of a family that hosts title matches at their inn, so I couldn't just rudely kick her out because that would make the association look bad, yeah? So I let her stay here for the night, in a safe place."

"And?"

"A-And you said it yourself, Big Sis. I needed someone to help me try out Cheerful Central Rook and Rook Corner Exchange, so——."

"So you thought you'd try out a little girl too?"

"I certainly did not!!"

Big Sis looks at me like utter garbage as I plead my case, like she's one step away from smearing my good name.

"I never said I'd take her as an apprentice, but I don't see anything wrong with teaching her how to play!"

"Ohh? When did you become so intent on spreading your knowledge, Yaichi?"

"W-Well, I feel it's my responsibility now that I have a title …"

As for Ai, she's sitting on her ankles behind me, trying to stay out of sight. And, yes, fully clothed.

"… Hmph."

To make matters worse, she doesn't seem scared of Big Sis at all. Actually, she's glaring at her like some kind of rival. Grade schoolers, fearless to a fault …

"Yaichi."

Big Sis calls my name and points her fan toward the corner of the room.

"Bring that eight-and-a-half-inch Shogi board over here."

"Sure …"

"Turn it over."

"Like this?"

I flipped the board on its head with the legs sticking up.

There's a strange looking depression between the four legs underneath. I can't tell what she's getting at. Ai, hiding behind my back, curiously peaks over my shoulder to look at the back of the board.

"Yaichi, what do the legs and board look like to you?"

"The legs? Umm … Well, they look kind of like a berry or fruit …?"

"A *kuchinashi* berry."

"*Kuchi* ··· *nashi?*"

"It means no making excuses in front of a Shogi board!"

My head droops as I bite my lip.

Ai coming to my room, staying the night and coming out of the bathtub butt naked were all beyond my control and I did nothing wrong ··· But making all these excuses really is unbecoming of a pro Shogi player. We're not allowed to "wait."

Sure, Big Sis wasn't happy that Ai was here overnight and naked on her arrival, but seeing me try to talk my way around it made her angry enough to use the Shogi board to put me in my place.

Shogi teaches everything worth knowing ···

"There's something else. See that divot in the middle?"

"Yes, I do."

"Know what it's for?"

"That I do not."

"It's called a *blood catcher*. It's built that way so the floor doesn't get dirty when you behead a cheating opponent during a match. So you don't have to worry about that as I slice off your head and put it in there."

That statement makes my mind go blank.

"You ··· you're joking ··· right?"

"There are knives in the kitchen, right?"

"Please say you're jokinggggggggg!!"

What is this woman!? She wants to cut off her younger brother's head!? That's terrifying!!

"Stop it al-rea-dy!"

Ai's voice blurts out from behind me, stopping Big Sis as she stands up to go get a blade, "Now, I don't know what you are to Master! But I think you don't have the right to do that to him!!"

Big Sis glares at the opponent who appeared in front of her. The grade schooler's arms open like an intimidating anteater. With a *what-is-this-creature?* kind of look on her face Big Sis slowly asks, "…… You don't know who I am? Playing Shogi, you don't know?"

"Not a clue!!"

No hesitation, none at all! Panicking, I start to explain, "A-Ai. This wonderful woman here is my senior apprentice, like big sister … You could say she's a member of my family."

"Big sister …?"

"And she holds two women's Shogi titles, Queen and the Women's Throne—."

"Queen ……?"

"Yes, that's right. She's a very important person, got it?"

"I, I got it!"

Ai starts trembling and points her finger directly at Big Sis.

"You're … one of those domm-egg-trixes, aren't you!?"

In that moment, a laugh—like a blown-up paper bag just exploded—bursts out of my throat.

Big Sis strikes the side of my face with her fan. Then, without a single shred of light in her gray eyes, she leans in and quietly asks, "… What's so funny?"

"N-Nothing! S-S … sorr-gah hahahahahahaha?! Ouch! Hey, stop! That hurts!! Stop hitting me with your faaaaaannn!!"

"I, I knew it! You are one of them!"

"No I ain't, blockhead!!"

Big Sis roars at Ai. It's rare for her to get this worked up in front of anyone other than me.

Ai shrunk back for a moment, afraid of that forceful display. But …, "Stop hitting Master! Abuse is bad! I'm against physical punishment!"

"I'm not punishing him."

"Then what would you call this!?"

"A treat?"

That day Big Sis started talking like a dominatrix.

"It's still a no-no! I came here to learn how to play Shogi from Master and to make him my Master!!"

"Shut up, brat."

"I'm not a brat! I've got a name, Ai Hinatsuru!!"

"That right. Brat! Your voice is annoying, so just shut up, okay?"

Big Sis waves her fan around like she's swatting flies.

"Mmhhh …!" Ai angrily puffs out her cheeks before suddenly flashing a grin. Then she looks up at Big Sis like the cutest little angel.

"*Dara.*"

"Huh?"

"*Darabuchi.*"

"… Hey, Yaichi. What's Brat trying to say?"

"Beats me ……"

Maybe it's something from her hometown in Ishikawa? I really have no idea.

Sighing to herself, Big Sis sits back down on the floor cushion.

That being a step in the right direction, it doesn't mean her mood has improved or she's going to let me off the hook.

It seems like Ai calling me *Master* really rubs her the wrong way. She's been bending her fingers one by one each time it's happened since we came in here, like she's keeping track. I have a good eye for the little things.

"Oh, Ai. Can I have a word with you?"

"What is it, Master?"

"Can you please stop calling me Master?"

"Huh? Okay, then what should I call you?"

"… Come up with that yourself."

Big Sis is getting ticked off at this grade schooler, so it's up to me, panicked as I am, to defuse the situation.

"*Sensei* or Ryuo is just fine. Call me anything you like other than Master."

"I like …? Hee-hee," Ai grins, eyes sparkling with hands cupped against her cheeks. It's the face of a kid in a candy store, standing in front of the counter saying, "*There are so many, I couldn't possibly choose one!*"

It's been a long time since the room was this quiet. So I reach for my cup and take a sip of tea. Big Sis opens her fan, *unyielding* written on the side, and she starts waving it at her face.

Finally, Ai looks up at me and says very cautiously, "O-Okay …… **Big Brother Yaichi**♡"

Tea flies out of my nose.

"W-Why *Big Brother* of all things!?"

"Because I've always wanted a big brother!"

"… Fine. Master it is. Please call me Master."

"So it's okay!? Yay! Yay!"

Crick, crack.

Wondering what just happened, I turn to face the weird sound and ··· Big Sis snapped her fan in half. *Unyielding* has broken.

"····· I'm going."

"Um, Big Sis? Going where ·····?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Tossing the broken bamboo and paper across the *tatami* floor, Naniwa's Snow White looked as though she were seeking revenge on the stepmother that fed her a poison apple as she declared, "Master's house."

SHOGI HOUSEHOLD

"So ··· Master's Master?"

"Yeah. Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*."

I explain to Ai who my Master is while the three of us ride the train.

"He's been to your family's inn a few times. He came with me to the Ryuo title match as well."

"Um ··· You're the only one I really remember, Master ···"

Sitting on my left, Ai's shoulders sink apologetically. Big Sis is sitting on my right, fanning herself with her (spare) fan while gazing at the advertisements hanging from the ceiling and looking very disinterested. She showed her face at my title match too, for what it's worth.

"Master's Master ····· What should I call him?"

"Hmm ····· Grand Master, maybe?"

"*Kiyotaki-sensei* is good enough. Don't forget, Brat, Yaichi ain't your Master."

"…… *Darabuchi.*"

"Would you just tell me what that means already? I doubt it's a compliment."

I'd rather not be sitting in the eye of the storm.

"But, Big Sis. Taking her to Master's house would mean—."

"… We can't exactly throw a grade schooler out on the street, now can we?"

She doesn't sound happy about it, but she seems to have Ai's best interest in mind. Probably admires her guts, coming all the way here from the north coast by herself. Big Sis has always liked naturally strong people, people with spirit.

I agree that it's best to let Master settle this. However, someone else disagreed.

"Master …? What's she talking about ……?"

"Well, basically, we'll ask my Master to take you under his wing in my place—."

"N-no, no! I don't want that! I want Master as my Master!! Master, you said I could call you Master, didn't you Master!?"

"Master this, Master that, just shut up, Brat! How can you can keep track of who's who!?"

This war of words went back and forth all the way to Master's front door. It was just one train station, so we got there in no time.

An old, traditional style Japanese house doubles as Master Kiyotaki's home and Shogi classroom.

"We're home!" Big Sis and I say in a loud voice as we step inside.

We always say "I'm home" rather than ringing the doorbell and announcing ourselves when we come here. Master was kind enough to insist on that.

The two of us lived here for about ten years, training every day as "live-in apprentices."

I've spent more time in this house than at my parents', so this place is special for me, and for Big Sis too.

"Oh, hello. Welcome back."

Sticking her head out of the kitchen and greeting us like nothing has changed is my Master's daughter, Keika.

A beautiful woman in her mid-twenties, Keika is kind and gentle, an amazing cook, and damn pretty to boot. Very well endowed too, but she keeps them under wraps. She's a goddess to me, one to whom I declared when I was a kid, "*I'm gonna marry you when I grow up!*" more times than I can count. And I often ended up getting a swift kick from Big Sis as a result. The two of us always vied for her attention.

"I'm back, Keika!"

"Nice to see you, Yaichi. Sorry about what my father put you through yesterday."

"I hate to say this, Keika, but he needs to be potty trained before going outside …"

"I've got him on a new regimen, don't worry. It's nice to see you too, Ginko."

"…… Thanks."

One smile from Keika and Big Sis rubs her face on her shoulder like a cute little kitten claiming her territory. Goddess.

"And a warm hello to you too, young lady. Please make yourself

at home."

"Th-Thank you! Please pardon the intrusion!!"

Ai gives a deep, sharp bow like a shrimp. Big Sis's reaction was out of left field, but Ai goes along with Keika's warm, embracing kindness right away. Goddess!

"…… Master is?"

"By the phone, I think. He's been talking to somebody for a while now—."

"Ginko, Yaichi. You came home."

Master Kiyotaki appeared, the floor thumping beneath his feet. He was looking a little rough.

One look at Ai, and he said, "Alright," with a nod before Big Sis or I could say a word.

"Great timing. Bring her with you and join me in the back. Keika, get dinner ready. We'll all chow down in the back tonight."

"Sure, sure."

Well, things are moving right along.

"…… What's going on?"

"What *is* going on?"

Big Sis and I exchange glances and urge the nervous, trembling Ai forward to follow Master.

⌂ WITH ONLY ASPIRATION

"I just finished talking with the association, to tell the truth," Master says to Ai once we arrive in a fifteen-by-fifteen-foot *tatami* room (twelve mats on the floor).

We sit around a small table.

"You are Ai Hinatsuru, yes?"

"Y-Yes!"

"Do you remember me? We've met before."

"Um … Was it, at the Ryuo title match …?"

"Yes, but we met a long, long time before that."

"Huh?"

"You must've been two, maybe? Met you at a title match hosted by Hinatsuru. Back then, I got to see you as a little tyke."

"Oh … I um, I see ……"

Looks like Ai doesn't remember a thing, curling up into a frightened ball like that. Well, she was two, so I can hardly blame her. Actually, it'd be scary if she did remember. It'd be unnatural, like a Big Sis playing Shogi as a two-year-old.

"I also attended your grandfather's funeral. Now then—."

Master straightens his back and says, "Ai. I don't care how much you want to play Shogi, runnin' away from home is never the answer."

Say what!? She ran away from home!?

"……"

Ai's face goes pale and she looks away. Her little hands are balled into shaking fists …… Well, looks like that's exactly what happened.

"Yaichi. What did she tell you?"

"Haaa … That her parents were very understanding."

"And you believed that crap? How stupid are you? Brain about to explode?"

Of course, Big Sis lets me have it right away, but now that I think about it, no parent on earth would ever send their nine-year-

old daughter to live with a man. And even if they did, they would've contacted the association first.

"And, seriously, Brat had a school backpack with her. Shouldn't that tip you off?"

…… Her choice of words too.

"Elementary schools finished up classes yesterday, meaning they're on spring break. Sounds like Ai came straight down here without going home. Her parents are saying that she's been planning this for some time, keeping a change of clothes and whatnot at school … This true?"

"……"

Nod. Ai bobs her head in resignation.

"But why did the association call here?"

"Cause Ai's parents knew that she's been strangely hooked on Shogi since the Ryuo title match. So, they had a hunch … And there you go."

"But Yaichi's of all places? Ai, you sure know how to pick 'em." Master chuckles to himself, saying these things out loud.

I don't think this is a laughing matter at all ……

"Ai. Why didn't you talk to your parents first?"

"…… Because I knew they'd definitely say no …"

"They wouldn't let you practice Shogi? Or they wouldn't let you come to Osaka?"

"…… Both ……"

Ai said she was learning how to play between chores.

While her grandfather loved Shogi, I guess her parents didn't feel the same way. Did she feel like she couldn't let them see her playing so much that running away from home was her only

option? I can relate, if that's the case. People like us can't live without Shogi.

Air. (2) Shogi. (3) Water. That's what we need—and in that order.

"Master."

I straighten my back and explain everything that led up to this point. "This girl ··· Ai's got real talent. I'd like nothing more than for her to continue playing if possible. Could you speak with her parents on my behalf? If there's anything I can do, just say the word. I have a promise to keep ·····"

"Let's seeee. Could drop the Kanazawa branch a line and see if a school up there would take her—."

"No, no, no!!" Ai screamed, her face turning bright red.

"I, I ····· I, I want to be Yaichi Kuzuryu's apprentice!! No one else!!"

"····· What makes *this* so special?"

Big Sis snatches my ear, pulls me over, and calls me *this*.

Ai answers without missing a beat, "Because he was so cool!!"

"Did you hit your head or something?"

Hey, Ginko, be nice.

"At the Ryuo title match, watching Shogi for the first time ····· Seeing him get so absorbed, fighting so hard he could barely stand ··· So majestic sitting in front of the board, moving one piece after another, fanning himself, going in and out of the hallway, everything! Everything about him was so cool!!" Ai says, making my whole body burn with embarrassment.

"That's why I wanted to play Shogi! To become like Master ···

It was the first time I'd ever wanted to be a professional Shogi player, and I'd never wanted anything so bad before ……!"

Ai grabs hold of her shirt, pulling and scratching at the collar.

I'm …… embarrassed but happy at the same time. Really happy.

That she likes Shogi this much because of me, flawed as I am, seeing my match lit this fire.

I'm also surprised. Ai's interest in Shogi sounds an awful lot like ……

"Okay, so you want to turn pro then?"

Big Sis's gray eyes bore into Ai's.

"……?"

Ai makes a *whaddat?* kind of face. Like a marshmallow.

"You want to be like Yaichi, yes? That means you want to become a pro Shogi player and win titles and all that, yes? Or do you want to enter the Women's League? Which is it?"

"???"

"Hold up … Don't tell me you don't know the difference between the two …?"

"O-Of course I do! I know that much!"

That's exactly what a clueless kid would say.

"Um …… Wo-women's League? It's for women, and pro Shogi players are all men? Yeah?"

"Master."

Big Sis cuts off Ai's rambling.

"Brat isn't interested in playing Shogi, she's just a grade school girl aspiring to be her idol. She'd never make it through training. There's no need to take her as an apprentice. You should send her

home."

"Is aspiration not enough?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Big Sis and I are taken aback by Master's unexpected words. Even Ai is stunned.

Master Kiyotaki looks at us with beady little eyes, clearly enjoying the moment, and says, "Yaichi. Tell Ai why you became my apprentice in the first place."

"Is … Is now the right time to tell?"

"What time would be better?"

"……"

"Master ……?"

He's pressing and Ai is staring right at me, so I decide to just go ahead and say it.

"…… Once I faced Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki-*sensei,* in a match, I aspired to be like him. Master was a judge at a regional tournament and he accepted my request to play in a small room at the inn where the tournament was taking place. That was our first match. It was a great honor. After that there were exhibition matches where we played and I became his apprentice."

Ai blushes, her eyes going wide.

"You did …?

"Well … yeah."

It's a bit embarrassing so I'd rather not talk about it but ……

"Long story short, my father and big brother taught me how to play Shogi, and I got good enough to play in tournaments—."

Whenever I went against Master in a match, I was blown away

by his strength.

"I was six at the time, but I remember everything. Back in those days, I was going to Shogi classrooms and tournaments and absolutely destroying the competition. Everyone was calling me a prodigy and it went to my head. I thought I could take on a pro and win without a handicap. *How about two down?* he offered. But we settled on him playing without a Rook …"

"Did you lose really bad ……?"

"No. By just one move."

"So it was a really close game!? You're amazing, Master!"

"It wasn't like that," I say with a grimace and explain exactly what happened that day.

"He *let me lose* by one turn. All so that I wouldn't get depressed after getting my butt handed to me."

But losing that way was even more of shock than an ass whooping.

It's much more difficult to win by a hair on purpose than steamroll an opponent. Not only did he accurately predict my every move, he acted like we were neck and neck until the very end. Only a real pro can pull that off.

Even a naïve kid like me could tell that Master's style was so much more profound than any game I'd ever played. The matches in classrooms and at amateur tournaments weren't anywhere near this exciting or inspiring, not even close.

One match stole my whole heart. I would've given anything to be like this person.

"After that …… After playing against him in that first match, participating in tournaments was nothing compared to playing

against Master in exhibition matches."

I would go anywhere in Japan if I heard that a city was hosting a Shogi tournament.

"I'd look for Master on arrival and instantly challenge him to an exhibition match the moment I found him. But I begrudgingly played in the tournament if he wasn't there. Can't tell you how many times surprised people called me a weird kid."

"That kind of passion was really surprising, but it also made me really happy."

Master chuckles again, looking a little embarrassed this time.

"So, yeah. I invited him. *Wanna play Shogi at my place?*"

"And that's how I got to be his apprentice."

I was six years old at the time. Just about to start elementary school.

I had no concept of what a pro was. I was just so happy for the chance to be so close to my idol, Kiyotaki-*sensei*, and playing Shogi was so much fun that I went right along with it.

It's amazing how similar I was to Ai, who ran away from home with only aspiration and a love for Shogi as her guide, without knowing jack squat about the Shogi world.

Shocking as it is, I can relate to how she feels. Almost a little too much.

"Nearly jumped out of my socks that day," said Keika as she came into the room to set the table for dinner. "My father leaves to be a judge at a Shogi tournament and comes home with a little boy and tells me, 'He'll be living with us starting today.' And don't forget, this was two weeks after he brought home a little girl!"

"Sorry about that ……"

I immediately bow my head. As for the girl who became his apprentice two weeks before me, she's making a face like a cat that refuses to be friendly no matter how many treats you give her.

While my motivation to become an apprentice was all "aspiration," Big Sis's was "revenge."

She lost to him in an exhibition match back when she was four and found Master's address on the Internet so she could come here every day and challenge him to a rematch. She wasn't tall enough to reach the train station ticket machine at the time, so the attendant had to bring out a stool for her every day. Her story has lived on as part of that station's lore.

Of course, letting things continue like that was too dangerous, so Master talked with her parents and he took her under his wing.

"I made Yaichi my apprentice because I thought Ginko was looking real lonely. Just as I'd expected, the two hit it off right away and played Shogi all day every day from then on."

Hitting it off wouldn't be the way I'd describe the day I met the dev—, I mean Big Sis. There's a mountain of objections I'd like to make, but I keep them in by the skin of my teeth.

"And now he's a pro with his own title and bringing an apprentice home …… It all went by so fast," Master says fondly while looking at the ceiling. He's got tears in the corners of his eyes.

"Yaichi, I'll have a word with her parents myself. Take Ai as your apprentice and train her for the Practice League Exam."

Practice League … So Master wants Ai to enter the Women's League?

Wait, the real problem here is—.

"You want her to be my apprentice!? Not yours!?"

"Yep. A live-in at that."

"Ugh—."

"What's a *live-in*?"

"An apprentice who lives with their Master to train."

Master answers Ai's question while I'm too shocked to say a word.

"Ai, can you live away from home, live with Yaichi? At your age, it'll be pretty tough!"

"I can!! I-I'd like nothing more than that!!"

"Ohh, that's the spirit. Hang in there, kiddo."

"I will!!"

"Ho-hold up a minute, please!" I frantically cut into the conversation these two are having to decide my fate.

"I'm still sixteen years old! A teenager with an apprentice!? It's too early, no matter how you look at it! And I'm only in my second year as a pro. Bringing in an apprentice to live with a guy living on his own would be—."

"Having a title proves you have the skill. There are pros who took apprentices in their first year too."

Master didn't budge.

"Ai came all the way to your place because she admires you! It's your duty as a pro Shogi player to recognize that kind of commitment. What else could you do? Kick this cute, starry-eyed girl out onto the streets of Osaka all by her lonesome? Only the *Kuzu Ryuo* would do such a thing."

"I'd be called trash a heck of a lot more for taking a grade school girl as my apprentice! …… And I've lost eleven matches

straight …… I'm in no position to take care of a kid ……"

"Yaichi. You know what *Gratitude* for a Master is?"

"Beating them in a match, right? Like I did yesterday."

"That wasn't a league match, so it doesn't count."

Master didn't budge.

"Real *Gratitude* isn't beating your Master. That's not a way to show gratitude or anything. What a Master really wants for their apprentice is to win a title and take on an apprentice of their own."

"……! Take an apprentice ……"

The Master–apprentice relationship in the Shogi world is strange. The Master gets nothing from their apprentice. Quite the opposite. Raising an apprentice means they have to sacrifice their own time to train a future opponent.

There's only one reason why pro Shogi players engage in this risky behavior … Because someone else took the time to train them.

So if Master is serious about me taking an apprentice, I can't refuse. And of course, Big Sis has no room to object. His words aren't binding by any means, but they're far stronger than any rules or regulations.

"……"

I take another look at the girl who might become my apprentice —all to determine whether it was her admiration for me and her love of the game that drove her to run away from home, to determine whether her words and determination are the real deal.

In that moment, I caught a glimpse of the wrinkles in her skirt.

Just on the right side—the hand she holds pieces with, only the

right side is wrinkled.

Seeing those wrinkles made my decision.

"…… Well, all right. I'll apply for her membership to the Practice League as my apprentice."

"!!"

Ai's face lit up, but Big Sis is staring daggers at my neck like you wouldn't believe.

"But only during spring vacation. I will train her as a live-in apprentice during the break, but she either goes home or I bring her here to live with you afterward. My point is, she will not permanently live with me. Is that clear!?"

"So, a live-in apprentice with a stipulation is it?"

"Master …… I thought you'd been spending a lot of time on your phone recently, but ……"

"It's because I don't make him pay for it," Keika whispers into my ear, but that's not what's wrong with this picture.

"So, then …… That means I have a grand apprentice …… Keika! We're celebrating tonight! Cook up the red rice!"

"Tonight's dinner is *okonomiyaki*."

Keika ignores her father's words with incredible grace and fires up the hot plate with all the ingredients ready to go.

"I see …," said Master, a little disappointed. "Then again, we've got a little one with us tonight, so *okonomiyaki* might be better after all," he added right away in his usual tone. Pro Shogi players don't get hung up on things for long.

"Isn't this great, Ai. We'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

Keika lets out a long sigh even as she smiles, spreading bacon

and egg out over the hot plate.

"Now that I think about it, Ginko and I are aunts now ····· Sounds weird just saying it ·····"

"Aunts?"

"Master–apprentice relationships are like a family. The Master is like a parent for their apprentices. Fellow apprentices are brothers and sisters. This is why I call Ginko 'Big Sis' while Keika is like my little sister, making you their niece, Ai."

"····· When did I say Brat could join us?"

Big Sis is staring at me through the steam rising off the hot plate, her face wavering back and forth. Scary as hell.

"So Ai, what'd ya think of real Osakan flavor?"

"It'ss desficiousss!"

Says Ai, trying to chew the hot *okonomiyaki* and speak at the same time, a bit of the sauce on her smiling cheeks. Cute as hell.

Meanwhile, Big Sis is silently chewing her own *okonomiyaki* that's drenched in dark sauce ····· It's normal for her to pour on the stuff until it's black as night, but it's a lot today, even for her. Ominous as hell ·····

Being stuck between these two polar opposites is making me a nervous wreck. Without much of an appetite, I just munch on the dried bonito flakes for now. Things are really salty.

Keika starts cooking round two and says, "I take it everyone's staying here tonight? Take turns in the bath once we're finished here."

"I, um, I've got a match tomorrow so ·····"

"You'll just lose anyway. Congrats on your twelfth straight loss. Hurry up and die."

"Master won't lose! Auntie Ginko should be quiet!"

"Who you calling *Auntie,* Brat!?"

"Ai, you can call me *grandpa* any time, okay?"

What happens now? I've got no clue ···

RECORD 3

PROFILE

Ginko Sora: Queen, Women's Throne


Ginko Sora

DATE OF BIRTH:	September 9th, 2002
HOMETOWN:	Osaka City
MASTER:	Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan
TITLE HISTORY:	

QUEEN:	3 Seasons (7th – 9th, 2013)
WOMEN'S THRONE:	3 Seasons (4th – 6th, 2013)
TOTAL APPEARANCES:	6 Times Queen: 3 Times (7th – 9th, 2013) Women's Throne: 3 Times (4th – 6th, 2013)
TITLE POSSESSION:	6 Seasons

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TO THE ASSOCIATION

"T-This is … the *Shogi Kaikan* …!" said Ai, donning a look of pure amazement as soon as we arrive at the Kansai Association headquarters.

"It's … I don't know. Easy to find!"

"Probably because of the giant letters spelling it out on the side of the wall. *Sho gi kai kan*."

The five-story building is a two-minute walk from Fukushima Station, just one stop down from Osaka Station on the Kanjou line.

It's the Kansai branch headquarters of the Japan Shogi Association, *Kansai Shogi Kaikan*—or just *the association* for short.

Today I'm going to register Ai for the Practice League test before my official match.

Big Sis got pissed and went home after dinner yesterday, but Ai and I spent the night at Master's place. Then, after eating a warm breakfast Keika made for us, we stopped at my place to change clothes before coming here.

"Is-is it really okay for anyone to go inside?"

"The first floor's all restaurants and stores, and the classroom is on the second, so yeah. It's from the third floor on up that people need clearance. Now, let's head in."

"Y– … Yes!"

Ai takes a brave step forward as I give her a verbal push.

I open the door.

And there's Big Sis standing right there.

"……"

"……"

"……"

Man, this is awkward.

"…… Loli King."

She quietly spits into my ear on her way past my shoulder before opening her parasol and heading off somewhere without another word. Was that supposed to be a new title …?

Big Sis knows I only took Ai as my apprentice (temp.) because Master told me to, but Naniwa's Snow White was glaring ice cold daggers at us. I should start calling her "Queen Elsa" at this point.

It's almost as if Master's seal of approval being stamped on the whole thing is what really got under her skin.

Ai tilts her head as the two of us watch Big Sis disappear into the busy morning streets.

"… What was Auntie doing here?"

"Probably signing autographs and fans. She's a popular player after all … And, yeah, never call her *Auntie* to her face, okay?"

'Cause it's my life that's on the line.

Once we make it further inside, Ai squeals with glee at the sight of all the stores lining the right side of the hallway.

"Oh, wow! Are all of these Shogi books?!"

One shop at the corner of the floor has mountains of Shogi books and goods on display. Signed books are just the beginning: they've got anything you could ever want. They invite you to please stop in and have a look for yourself.

"Whoa … This board and pieces are so fancy … No way?! One, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand … one million yen?! Wow! Wow!" she yells, pressing her forehead against the display case and absolutely beside herself.

She's like the Alps Boy who found a trumpet in the shop window. The lady at the register smiles with her eyes as if watching something precious.

But what really got Ai excited at the shop was——.

"Master! Master! They have fans!"

"Of course they do."

Fans autographed by popular pros are some of their best sellers. It's because you feel that much stronger just by having one in your hand!

"Fhuuah … So many hard words (>-<)," says Ai as she opens up one of the sample fans to read it. There must be quite a few characters that a third grader can't quite comprehend just yet because she's tilting her head and mumbling, "Huh? Huh? How do you read this? *Ipposenkin?*"

"That's *ippu senkin*. It means there are times that one Pawn is more valuable than one thousand pieces of Gold. It's a Shogi saying."

"And this one? *Tobu …?*"

"*Hishou* actually. The writer is probably telling people to grow as if determined to fly in the sky."

"This one?"

"*Konton.*"

"And that means …?"

"Huh? … Like really messed up chaos, I guess."

"Why write that?"

"… Beats me."

Since everyone writes something different, sometimes only the writer knows what it really means. My Master's fan says, "My

prime starts tomorrow." Frickin' awesome!

"… Not this … That's not it …"

"What're you looking for?"

"All pros have their own signed fans, right?"

"Nah, just the popular ones."

"Popular?"

"Legendary players from the past, A–classers … And pros with titles usually make autographed fans."

"Ahhh …!" Ai's face lights up like fireworks.

"So you have one, right Master?!"

"Hm? Uh, yeah …"

I carefully hide the sample fan with my name on it behind the shelf so Ai can't see.

My handwriting is a bit too unique, so:

***"Kuzu* Ryuo writes like trash too lol …"**

"He'll never live down the shame …"

"I'd give back the title in his shoes."

The net had a field day. Like hell I'd let Ai see a premium fan like that.

… Can you blame me? I never thought I'd win a title …… Otherwise, I'd have worked on my penmanship …

"Hm … That's weird. I've seen them here before … Ah! I bet they're sold out!"

"I knew it, Master! You're so popular!!"

"Hahaha. Well, shall we head up?"

I lead her away from the shop with a dry laugh.

I gotta remember to put the fan back later …

Up to the second floor.

Ai starts pulling at my sleeve. The second letters spelling out *Shogi Doujo* come into view.

"!! !!"

Ai's looking at me with a burgeoning expectation.

I force a smile and say, "We've got to get you registered for the test in the upstairs office first. I want to introduce you to the staff too."

"But——!"

"You'll be playing before you know it."

She starts mumbling to herself as if the anticipation is killing her while I steer her away from the door with my hand on her back.

I was the same way back then ··· I bask in nostalgia as we arrive on the third floor.

This is where the association's office is, and it's full of staff members.

"Ex-cuse us."

"Oh, Yaichi ··· I mean Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Good morning."

One of the guys I know pretty well—then again, I've been coming here for ten years so I know everybody, but one of the veterans of the group comes forward to help us.

He used to scold me a lot back when I was a kid, sort of like a teacher at school. So it feels a little weird for him to address me as *Sensei* since I became a pro.

The staff is hard at work making the association run smoothly.

They're even more important than pro Shogi players in a way.

No one would really notice if five or ten of us weren't here, but matches couldn't even get started if even one of them were gone.

I smile as wide as my lips will go and introduce Ai.

"I'm here today to set everything up for this girl here … Has any word come in?"

"Ah, yes. I've heard, I've heard."

His line of sight locks in on Ai, hiding at my side, and says, "Sora-*sensei* just informed us: *a pervert holding an elementary school girl captive at home is on his way here* and she told us to contact the police on sight."

Damn it Ginko …

"N-not Big Sis too! Me, kidnap a grade schooler? You know I'd never do that, right?"

"I didn't think so."

"Of course I wouldn't."

Ha-ha-ha. We share a good laugh right away.

"Well then, who is this cute young lady?"

"I'm his live-in apprentice!" says Ai bubbling over with pride before I can answer. My brain feels like it's going to explode.

"HUH?!"

Every staff member on the floor raises their voice in unison.

Everyone who was pretending not to listen heard every word … Hey, hey, why is she reaching for the phone? What's with their reaction? This some kind of gag?

"A, um … live-in apprentice, Kuzuryu-*sensei*? In this day and age? A grade school girl?"

"No, what? Ah, umm …"

There's no choice but to power through at this point. So I make a calm, composed, "Yes she is. Is that a problem?" kind of face and nod. "Yes. Per my Master's instruction."

"O-Oh, I see ··· The Kiyotaki line ···"

The fact that Master took Big Sis and I as live-in apprentices when we were really young is pretty well known. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that, as someone in his line, I would take on a young live-in apprentice of my own. Nothing strange or unnatural about it at all!

"And look here, I've got a letter from my Master as well."

"That you do ···"

"And she's only staying with me until the Practice League test is over."

I explain that Ai is from the north coast, that she wants to enter the Practice League in hopes of one day joining the Women's League, and that my Master has spoken with her parents, one after the other, while confirming the test date.

"And you know, it's spring break right now, yes? It'd be better for her to focus on studying here in Osaka. Then she'll commute from her home on the north coast once she's passed the test."

"Oh, if that's how it is then——."

Just then I saw a glimmer of recognition pass across his face in that moment.

"What?! I want to live with you from now on, Master!"

Whispers! Another uneasy aura sweeps through the office. Me, I'm panicking.

"Wait, Ai. Miss Ai. Listen ···"

"I'll do anything you ask! I'll do the cooking! Cleaning and

laundry too! A-and other things ··· if that's what Master wants ···"

Whisper, whisper, whisper ···

"Heeeeeeey! Do you want everyone to get the wrong idea?! Never once have I said anything like that?! Right?!"

"B-But ··· What about the *try out a little girl* ···?"

"Kuzuryu-*sensei* ···"

"No, no, not at all! That was Big Sis trying to embarrass me!!"

I desperately try to explain, as if my life depended on it. I didn't take on a grade schooler as a live-in apprentice because I wanted to!! That's the truth!!

"Look, I like older women like Keika! I've no interest in younger girls whatsoever! You know that, right?! How long have we known each other?!"

"····· All right. I trust you, *Sensei*."

It looks like he finally understands the situation. Trust built up over a decade has won the day. After all, the most important thing to pro Shogi players is trust.

The two of us were smiling right after that, catching up on recent news while getting the apprentice registration and Practice League test application squared away. I worked really hard on the paperwork but couldn't shake the feeling that he was doing his best not to look me in the eye behind that glued-on smile he wore from start to finish.

Once everything was done and we were just about to leave the office, he gave me a serious look, a look more serious than I've ever seen in the ten-plus years I've known him. "Kuzuryu-*sensei*," he said.

"Yes?"

"…… Everything is on the level, right?"

He doesn't trust me at all.

THE ASSOCIATION'S CLASSROOM

Ai lets out a long sigh the moment we leave the office.

"Haa … I was so nervous—."

"You and me both …"

Knowing I was one wrong step away from becoming a social outcast really had me on edge. I'm not entirely sure there wasn't a misstep somewhere.

I've already gone on the offensive, destroyed weird rumors before they spread. Now how will things play out …?

Well, there's really no point in worrying about that now.

Playing Shogi is to think ahead, but pros misread each other all the time. Therefore, it always ends up being a *read and react* kind of philosophy in the end: so take care when you can and the rest will work itself out.

"Oh, and Master."

"Yeah?"

"What's the Practice League?"

My foot nearly misses the next stair step.

"Seriously, you … We explained it to you in and out, IN AND OUT, last night, didn't we?"

"Uh, ummm …… The *okonomiyaki* was just so good that … that …"

Ai makes her excuse, scratching her fingernails across the stairwell railing. I can't deny that Keika's *okonomiyaki* is delicious.

This girl ate three of them by herself. What does she think they are: pancakes?

"… The Practice League is like a school for people who want to join the Women's League. You play against other people wanting to become pros and your rank goes up if you win."

"Win the fight and your rank goes up … It's just like a game!"

"Shogi is a game, you know."

An advanced board game that has dominated a certain world for over a thousand years: that's SHOGI.

"Everyone starts out in F-Class. You go up to E2, E1, D2, D1 and C2 from there. Anyone with a C1 ranking has the right to join the Women's League."

"If I join the Women's League, will Shogi be my job like it is for you, Master?"

"They don't have as many matches as pros do, but yeah."

"What's the difference between pros and Women's League Players?"

"That's complicated, so I'll save that explanation for later."

I point my thumb toward the second floor classroom entrance and say, "I'm sure that's more interesting right now, yes?"

"Yep!!"

Then, I open the classroom door and walk inside with my apprentice (temp.).

The classroom is full of kids.

Usually it's overflowing with senior citizens at this hour, but since spring break started yesterday for all the public schools, all the young boys and girls with a taste for Shogi come here in the morning on weekdays too. It's nice to hear all those pieces clacking

away.

From what I can see, most of these kids are in elementary school or younger. Maybe they're part of a children's class?

"I'd like to make a Match Card for her——," I say to the classroom staff member sitting behind the counter and start to introduce Ai.

However.

Every single child in the room turned to face me at once before I could finish and say, "D—."

D?

"Dragon King————!!"

Aren't you being a bit too literal with that translation, kiddos?

"Sign this!"

"Sign please!"

"Can I have your autograph?!"

"Dragkin, play me!"

The children rush me. Not a single one of them calls me Ryuo. They pull, bump, nudge, push, kick. The kids show no restraint or respect as they trample over me, calling me whatever they please.

Ai is such a good kid, I forgot that this is how grade schoolers usually are. But please, stop with the *Dragkin* already!

"All right, line up! One line here ··· No, make three lines!!"

I get them to line up on one side of the long table and pull Ai around to the other. Then I put three Shogi boards on top of the table.

One person against three opponents at the same time—

sanmensashi, three on one.

"Beat her and I'll sign whatever you want."

"Who's this?"

"Who's that girl?"

"My apprentice (temp.)," I say.

"Apprentice?"

"Baby Dragon!"

"Is Baby Dragon strong?"

"Extremely strong," I tell them.

"So I beat Baby Dragon and you'll give me an autograph?"

"What's the handicap?"

"Match? Hmm, good question … No handicaps for anyone should be fine."

I carry a chair with caster wheels over to the table and tell Ai to take a seat and say, "Ai. Three on one. You up for it?"

"Y-Yes!" I don't blame her for being a bit surprised at first, but "Here we go!!" she says, swinging her arms and psyching herself up for battle.

The first kid in each line starts lining up the pieces. Ai's having a tough time because she has to set up three boards by herself.

"Ready when you are!"

The matches begin just as the last pieces fall into place.

I take a look at the Match Cards that the children have placed between the piece stand and the board. It's sort of like a classroom ID, a green card with their name, rank and recent win-loss record written on it.

The best ones are 2-*dan*, the lowest are beginners … Now, how many games can she win?

It's extremely difficult for someone facing multiple opponents to focus on one game, so it's difficult to win even if said someone is stronger than their opponents.

However, Ai is in overdrive.

Normal kids plow straight ahead with the first strategy they think of without taking any time to read the board. They make a lot of mistakes, so it's pretty common for one wrong move to bring the match to a swift and sudden end.

Meanwhile, Ai's right fist is clutching the hem of her skirt today too. Not only is she deciphering further and faster than anyone, she's being careful. Ai's in her element.

Her talent is on a whole different level from any of the kids here.

"Baby Dragon is a monster!"

"I can't beat her ···"

All twenty of them were laid to waste in forty minutes.

I was expecting her to lose one or two matches, but to win every single one ···

"Haa ··· Haa ··· ah. Thank you, for playing me ···"

Ai puts the last kid in checkmate, shoulders heaving as she lowers her head. She's soaked with sweat. Sliding back and forth on those casters at high speed while making moves on three boards really takes a physical toll. It's a Shogi shuttle run after all.

"*S-sensei,* where should we rank her ···?" The understandably stunned classroom staff member asks with a blank Match Card in her hand.

"Two ··· No. Start her off as a 1-*dan* please. Oh, here's the admission fee. She's going to be here all day."

In terms of ability, 2-*dan* or 3-*dan* would be a better fit for her, but I want to give her as many chances as possible to feel the joy that comes from winning her way up the ladder. I put her in 1-*dan* like a parent wanting what's best for their children.

Then again, Ai's still a raw amateur with only three months' experience. Thinking logically, it'd be insane to put her 1-*dan*.

"Ai!"

I take the card from the staff member and hand it to Ai, who keeps shaking her skirt back and forth without realizing her white panties are in plain sight.

"This is your Match Card. Think you can fill it up with white stars?"

"… Yep!!"

Miss Ai Hinatsuru: 1-*dan*——Ai lifts the green card with her name on it with both hands, looking at it like she's found the greatest treasure in all the land. My first apprentice (temp.) smiles from ear to ear.

☖ GRAND ENTRANCE! SILVER KNIGHT

"Here. Drink up."

"Yay! Yummy yummy thank y–♡"

I buy her a pack of orange juice out of the classroom vending machine. She plunges the straw straight in and starts glugging it down before saying thank you. Playing Shogi makes everyone thirsty.

"Gpppah! … Master, you have a match today, right? What time does it start?"

"From 10."

"It does?! Shouldn't you hurry up?!"

"Hurry up …? It doesn't start for another fifteen minutes."

There's really nothing to do to get ready before a match, so going in early would just mean I sit in front of the board in awkward silence.

Plus, this is a Throne League match with four hours of in-game waiting time. It'll go well into the night.

I'll run out of steam halfway through if I go in with too much zip.

"The arena is right upstairs. Showing up at the last minute is no problem."

"Y-Yes it is! You should always start five minutes early!"

She pushes against my back, trying to get me to move. What doesn't she understand about there being fifteen minutes left?

"Alright then, would you like to see the arena?"

"May I?!"

"As long as you're with me."

The arena above the fourth floor is kept off limits as a general rule … But the Kansai Shogi Association lets people who use the classroom watch regulated matches as a service, so they wouldn't say no to a tour. And, for a fee, you can rent out the space for yourself too.

"This is the Match Board. These magnets with players' names on them show who's playing who in what arena each day."

I start explaining lots of things as the two of us make it to the fifth-floor entrance at the top of the stairs.

"The loser comes out here and lowers their magnet after the

match is over. That system lets everyone know the results."

"Wow ···"

Ai looked a bit shy at first, but her curiosity seems to have taken over. Those eyes are absolutely sparkling.

"So your match today is in ··· *Gyouedan no Aida*?"

"That's *Onjyoudan no Ma*."

"And you are facing ··· Kami, Kami ··· Umm, how do you read that?"

"Kannabe. Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan*. He's an up-and-coming pro from the Kanto area."

I was halfway out of my shoes and about to lead her inside the arena when from out of nowhere!





"Ha! Ha! Ha! … That name is just a mask that allows me to blend in with the outside world. My true name is something else entirely …!"

"?! Y-You——."

I turn around to see a man dressed in white standing there, hiding half of his princely, well-defined face by lifting his hand into a kind of pose, looking at me between his fingers with his right eye (color contact and all). Then he declares his "true name" with all seriousness: "Knight of the Shogi Realm! *Silver Chevalier*——Sir Ayumu God Cauldron!"

A passing staff member stopped to say hello. "Oh, Kannabe-*sensei*. Good morning."

"It's God Cauldron!!"

Apparently, God Cauldron 6-*dan* (18 years old) is not willing to give any ground on the matter and seems genuinely offended.

The staff member must be used to this because he doesn't look bothered at all and ignores the retort. People who can't deal with this level of strange characters could never work at the Shogi Association.

"My word … That's the problem with Kansai people. Not a trace of refinement to be found ……"

Whispering to himself, Ayumu walks up to the board, removes the *Kannabe* magnet and replaces it with one that says *God Cauldron* without asking. Did he bring in his own homemade magnet? Crafty guy …

Ai (and only Ai) looked impressed at the sight of Sir Ayumu.

"Master! That, that man … he's got a cape?!"

"… Yes. That's a cape."

"I've never seen one in real life before!"

Same for me. Wearing a cape to an official Shogi match …?

"Oh … Wee lass! You must possess great sense, spotting my cape as you have. I cordially invite you to join my Gate East Legion."

Sir Ayumu God Cauldron extends his right arm with refined elegance, silver cape swishing behind him.

He looks—like royalty!

The Shogi world is divided into the Kanto area in the east where Ayumu is from and Kansai in the west where we live.

The Kanto Shogi Association is located in Harajuku of Tokyo, the city of youth, and is home to more than three times as many pro players as Kansai. Most titleholders are registered with Kanto, so a lot of new strategies and established ones originated there.

Going against the stylish and flashy pros of Kanto, Kansai pros who like to stray from the established norms and fight fire with fire to the bitter end seem vulgar by comparison. The Kanto pros treat us like outlaws.

"We Kanto professionals use a style of Shogi that is detailed yet vivid! Wee lass, study our ways and you too shall receive our Kanto Shogi spirit refined through years of training!"

"I-I am Kujyuryu-*Ryuo*'s apprentice! I will never join you!"

Said apprentice still can't say my name.

"Hm Hm Hm … Ha-ha-ha-ha! That *Dragkin* shall meet its end this night! Enjoy your short apprenticeship while it lasts!"

"What was that?!"

God Cauldron-*sensei* demonstrates his skill with children by

hitting it off with a nine-year-old in the blink of an eye. So it was you, the one who started this *Dragkin* business.

Separating myself both physically and mentally from the two, who were about to start dueling with each other, I pose a question.

"By the way, Ayumu. Where'd you buy that cape?"

"At Blue Mountain, if you must know."

Just call it Aoyama like a normal person, would you? It's not coffee. But seriously, you can find anything in Tokyo ···

"They also carry a black version. Would you like one for yourself?"

"Master! They have black too?!"

"No thanks are necessary."

The moment I give him a clear, "No thank you," he answers with a somber, "If you insist ···" Even Ai is slumping over. Did she want to see me wear it ···?

"Humph ··· It matters not."

Whoosh! Sir Ayumu needlessly swishes his cape, turns his back and says, "I await you in the Throne Room!"

"You mean the *Onjyoudan no Ma*."

WHA-ha-ha-ha-ha ··· Once his unnecessarily loud laughter disappears, Ai looks up at me and says, "Master! Are you friends with that person?!"

"Not sure about friends but ··· Well, we've known each other for years."

The Shogi world is small. Kids dreaming of turning pro run into each other at tournaments from a young age and eventually start crossing paths in either the East or West Shogi Associations once their serious training gets underway.

Then they're fated to meet each other in battle for the rest of their lives once they turn pro. Well, as long as they keep playing professional Shogi anyway.

"Ayumu is two years ahead of me in school, but we're like classmates because we started training at the same time."

"Oh, I get it! He's your rival?!"

"Rival, huh. I'd be honored if he thought of me that way …"

Even though Ayumu is in Kanto and I'm in Kansai, it's true that we've been very aware of each other since we were kids. He's even gone on and on about how we were fated to do battle because of something in our past lives.

He became much more intent on beating me when I became Ryuo.

You'd think it was because a rival player around his age surpassed him but … that's not quite right.

For Ayumu, who's always fancied himself a holy knight, the *Dragon King* symbolizes evil. He sees the title as a *dark overlord* that must be defeated. To put it another way——.

Ryuo (Dragon King) = Evil = Me

Knight = Holy= Himself → Must slay the dragon (' · w · ')

Like that. It's gotten to that point.

"He always had a thing for royalty and an attitude problem, but once he turned pro and started earning his own money, self-control went right out the window."

"Is that why he bought the cape?"

"He's got money coming in left and right because he's winning left and right. He's already secured this year's award for consecutive wins and claimed the highest winning percentage. His

path to a title match opens up with the win today ··· With my eleven-game losing streak I doubt he considers me to be much of a rival ··· The Dragon King is probably going down ···"

"That's not true! You're the best, Master!!"

——The best, huh?

All pro players think that about themselves to some degree. They couldn't keep fighting in this world if that weren't true. Being on this skid, being ridiculed on the Internet, my confidence was showing some cracks.

But strangely, my confidence got one heck of a boost just from this little girl calling me "the best." Shogi players are quite simple.

"Master! Best of luck in the field!!"

"Ha-ha ··· Well, I'll do the best I can."

Grimacing at my apprentice's over-the-top battle cry, I turn toward the arena where the *Silver Chevalier* awaits.

THE MATCH BEGINS

Kansai Shogi Association headquarters, fifth floor——the *Black Corridor* has three different arenas.

The whole floor is a replica of the Black Corridor in Edo Castle (apparently it has one) and is divided into the *Onjyoudan no Ma* or "Throne Room," *Ongedan no Ma* or "Lower Guard Room" and *Fuyou no Ma* or "Lotus Room." The Throne Room is one step higher than the others. Only the most skilled players are allowed to use it: it's practically a holy site for the Kansai Shogi world. It's also home to the window where a certain Master of mine relieved himself.

"Humans follow land."

"Land follows sky."

"Sky follows Taoism."

Scrolls written by well-known Shogi legends from long ago hang in the alcoves around the room. Sir Ayumu, sitting on his ankles in the *lower seat* with his cape collar standing up around his ears, is already in front of the only Shogi board in the Throne Room and elegantly sipping tea from a cup with a saucer in his hand. I'd expect nothing less from royalty.

"Ohh …? So you've come without fear?"

"I pretty much have to. It's a match."

I go around to the *upper seat* and sit down on a thin floor mat. Then I take off my wristwatch and put it on the *tatami* mat beside me while getting comfortable. I take a fan, handkerchief, glasses and water out of my second bag after that.

It's much easier to sit on a mat that I'm used to, so I have the association send one of the mats whenever I have to play someplace else. My legs tend to fall asleep if it's one of those expensive, fluffy types and I can't have that.

Every Shogi player has their own pre-match rituals.

Wiping off their glasses, closing their eyes to focus, bringing in their favorite pot and cups to drink tea like Ayumu. Oh, and there are some who bring their own air purifier (one equipped with minus-ion technology). It's not a problem, as long as they're not all that loud.

A long table is set up next to the board for the record keeper. It's their job to document the match and keep track of time. They also set up the board and place the mats for us.

Sensing that it's about time, I say, "Should I line them up?"

"Proceed."

Sliding my match glasses on, I reach for the box of pieces on top of the board and take them out of the silk covering inside. It's a higher ranking player's job to get the pieces out and put them away.

I use the established pattern to line up my pieces.

There are two styles for exactly how to put the pieces into place: *Itou* and *Ohashi,* with *Ohashi* being the standard. I use *Ohashi,* by the way, and of course Ayumu doesn't use either, choosing his own original style.

The record keeper sees that all pieces are in place and announces.

"From Kannabe-*sensei* please."

"God Cauldron please."

After the usual exchange with the record keeper (ignored per usual) both of us close our eyes to gather our thoughts in the last minutes before the match. My brain is already moving a mile a minute.

"It is time. Please begin the match."

"Ready when you are."

Both players bow and Sir Ayumu makes the first move. Then, he removes the cape. Keeping it on until the first move was Ayumu's style of etiquette, basically his way of showing respect. Personally, I'd rather he didn't. It's startling.

I make the second move right away.

Since the order for today's match was determined beforehand, I came up with my strategy at home. Both of us proceeded at a

blistering pace, focused only on getting our pieces in the right places as quickly as possible.

Our battle formations take shape on the board.

Ayumu looks up at me with a fearless smile, gracefully moving his fingers as he slides his pieces across the board.

"Heh-heh-heh … Are you capable of laying siege to the Silver walls of my Citadel?!"

That's just a simple *yagura*.

"Kannabe-6 *dan*, *yagura* formation …"

Ayumu's got fire in his eyes, absolutely exuding energy while the journalist sitting next to the record keeper writes everything down like nothing unusual is going on. This is surreal.

Yes, a Shogi journalist.

Today's match is an important league match that determines who's eligible to compete for the *Throne* title. Today's results will not only be in Shogi magazines, but in mainstream newspapers as well. You know that small corner of the newspaper that shows Shogi standings? It'll go there.

Ayumu is currently undefeated. His path to the title match becomes almost assured with a victory today.

On the other hand, I lost every match so far and I've already been disqualified for this league next season. This match is just a formality, for show.

However, a type of paramount philosophy exists in the Shogi world: *A match that may be a formality for you could be valuable to your opponent, so defeat them at once!*

Since Ayumu's dreams of winning the title would disappear should I win today, that philosophy fits my situation to a "T." I

should take Ayumu down here and now. And——.

"… I've had enough of being called *Kuzu* Ryuo," I whisper to myself as I move my own king into a *yagura*-style fortress.

⌂ UNFORESEEN! KANNABE-STYLE 1 FIVE LANCE

Forty-six moves have been made at thirty minutes into the match.

Moves have come one after another following the standard *Aiyagura* (meaning both of us are doing the *yagura* strategy) style by the book.

After twenty moves of the same song and dance that took up no time at all, everything up to move ninety-one was as standard as standard could get. *Yagura* is déjà vu all over again.

"Da-da-da-daaaaaaan! Upgraded from *yagura* to *anaguma*!! Defense +2000 points!!"

Striking a pose straight out of Vanguard with a piece sandwiched between his fingers, Ayumu strengthens his defense further still, completing a wall around his king on the left edge of the board. That formation is called *yagura anaguma*. I don't know anything about this +2000 defense points thing, but it's solid as a rock.

Of course, I'm not just twiddling my thumbs.

Aiyagura matches are known for players splitting their forces into well-defined offense and defense groups before the battle truly gets underway. A *build up, build up, kaboom!* kind of match.

"Now then … What to do, what to do," I whisper, tapping my

chin with my open fan. The board is saturated with pieces. Careful not to break the balance of my own line, I move my Bishop to the front lines to use the *projectile weapon* to probe the enemy for openings.

"Heh! A bold move."

Ayumu retaliates immediately by advancing a Pawn to the space directly in front of my Bishop to force it back.

I take a deep breath and retreat my Bishop. This is all according to plan, of course. It's all to get Ayumu to launch an attack and time my counter to stop in his tracks. The classic bait and switch.

"As you wish ···"

Ayumu picks up a piece and strikes another Vanguard pose (a victory pose, maybe?).

"Heed my call, fly Pegasus!"

Accepting my invitation, he sends his right side *keima*, Knight, to the front lines and ignites the flames of war.

This is going so well that I couldn't help but smile.

"You know what they say ··· *Pawns feast on the high-flying Knight.*"

"That's *high-flying Pegasus*, if you please."

Attacks never stop once they get underway. I need to break the line of Pawns advancing like a tsunami with my own Pawn wall. Known as *Shogi's skin*, the Pawns break apart as muscle and bone collide.

"Silver Sword! Feel the wrath of my blade!"

Ayumu slices forward with his Silver.

I match him blade for blade——taking his Silver and making it my own. Silver, you're mine!

This should be the part where Ayumu takes my Silver with his Rook but ···

"Haaaaaaa ·····!!" Ayumu lets out a long breath and reaches for his next piece ··· the *kyousha*, Lance!!

"Behold!! My secret technique——*Right Wing Holy Lance*!!"

"Ugh?! Th-this is ···!"

One look at the sharp Lance bearing down on me like a spear on the right side of the board makes my blood run cold.

He sacrificed his own Silver for this attack! A Silver Sword and Spear combination, sacrificing the blade to strike in quick succession!

So he's willing to throw pieces away to break through ···

I anticipated that Ayumu might try this when I was preparing for the match.

But! There's a lot more pressure going against the real thing!

"T-The ··· *Kannabe-Style 1 Five Lance* ···!"

"It's the *Right Wing Holy Lance*!!"

Sir Ayumu fervently rebukes. Either one is fine by me.

"Kannabe 6-*dan*'s next move is the highly anticipated Kannabe-style 1 Five Lance ···"

The journalist completely ignores Ayumu's objections as well. However, he's clearly writing with a burning passion.

The Kannabe-style 1 Five Lance is a *new strategy* developed by, you guessed it, Sir Ayumu himself. This technique has become the driving force behind his ascent through the Throne League: completely different from a guy who lost every game like me! (Tears.)

Claiming to be a Knight and all, Ayumu has a really good sense

of how to use Lances. The utmost caution is necessary once he's got one in hand. And by the way, *Lance* is just another way to say *Spear,* so he's not just pulling names out of thin air. I think. Maybe.

"Hmmm ···"

Taking his Lance would be really easy. Easy, but ···

We Kansai Shogi pros have researched how to defend against this technique the moment it was first used in an official match. I'm confident in my studies, otherwise I wouldn't have drawn it out.

The days of Kansai Shogi players being called hardheaded outlaws are over. We ain't going to be out-researched by those Kantoers!

Then again, I'm sure Ayumu and those guys to the east have been researching the strategy even further. Ayumu has absolute confidence in his technique, otherwise he wouldn't use it so much in official matches.

I have a plan ··· But, I need to take my time, carefully read the board and make sure that there are no holes in my prepared strategy.

"Hmm ····· Now then. What to do."

I take a deep breath and let my butt hit the floor mat, take off my glasses, lean against the armrest and let my mind set to work.

Click-clack. Click-clack. I open and close my fan, establishing a rhythm like a metronome to help me think.

Read.

Read.

Read, read, read ···

"····· That'll do."

Sitting back on my ankles in perfect posture, I make my move. "Whoa?!" The record keeper and journalist exclaim as they lean in for a closer look.

I—*didn't* take Ayumu's Lance.

I left it there, sharp tip still stuck in the side of my forces.

Instead, I took Ayumu's Pegasus—the Knight he sent out first: a move that should be catching him by surprise.

I look up at my opponent with a *How'd you like that, Ayumu?!* look in my eyes when ···

"Haa ··· This color, this aroma. I do declare tea to be British royalty's finest accomplishment ···"

You're the tofu shop owner's son from the suburbs, are you not?

But I felt uneasy the moment I saw the self-proclaimed nobleman take an elegant slurp of tea. Is that a poker face? Or did he see this coming a mile away ···?

It doesn't matter. I'll get to enjoy his stunned royal face the moment he figures out what I'm really after!

"··· May I see the record?"

"Here you are."

Taking a look at the paper the record keeper handed to me, I was stunned to learn that the last move took forty minutes. My move.

"No way!"

It felt like ten minutes tops, but time flies when you're reading the board. I don't blame Ayumu for drinking tea at all.

The Throne League allows four hours of waiting time. Using

twenty minutes at this time would have been all right, but forty is way, way too much. Now I'm far behind in waiting time ……

"Pardon the intrusion."

It's almost lunchtime, so one of the staff members comes to ask us what we'd like to order. They'll get it delivered.

"Kannabe-*sensei*. What would you like to eat?"

"Let me think … Yes. I would like to dine on *Phoenix Easter Egg Chaos* today."

"Chicken and eggs on rice, all right."

Sir Ayumu pretty much always gets the same lunch, so the staff had no trouble understanding that order.

"And for you, Kuzuryu-*sensei*?"

"Ah, nothing for me."

Sir Ayumu looks surprised.

"Will you not dine?"

"I was thinking I'd eat out today."

"I see …"

Sir Ayumu looks at me with the eyes of the only Chihuahua left unsold at a pet store. He might be a bit nervous about eating by himself at the Kansai Association, away from home.

But I can't just ignore my apprentice (temp.). Sorry, Ayumu.

■ LUNCHTIME

Arriving at the second-floor classroom, I find Ai thoroughly engaged in a Shogi match.

"Oh! Still going strong."

She's got her Match Card between the board and the piece

stand like a real veteran and a chess clock right next to the board. Someone must've brought one in and taught her how to use it during one of her many matches.

She's playing against a girl I see in the classroom all the time. Her big eyes and short, chestnut-colored hair stick out, as does her competitive nature. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say she is about as old as Ai. Being about the same age, both girls are playing their hearts out.

"Let's see ···"

Careful not to break their concentration, I quietly make my way toward them and look at the board.

Their game is in the final stages, formations in shambles on the board. That battle must have been intense.

"··· Gahhh, I don't know anymore! This'll work!"

Ai's opponent gives up reading the board as time ticks down and she makes a move. She's decisive.

Now her turn, Ai, "····· Here, here, hereherehereherehere ·····!"

Rhythmically whispering to herself, she tries to read her way to victory. Even her body is rocking back and forth.

··· It'll take a while, but there is a way to put her opponent's King in checkmate.

Pros can tell at a glance, but anyone can miss a shorter route to the King during a match.

Now then, can Ai find the right moves in the middle of a live game?

"··· Here!!"

Ai reaches for her captured pieces and, with a sharp breath, snaps it down onto the board to put the opposing King in check.

"What?! ··· Ummm ···"

The girl fretted for a moment, faced with a move she never expected. After reading the board as long as time would allow, she grabbed her King as if reaching through water and then slid it to the side——but that King was already dead.

Ai had anticipated the move and forged ahead taking no time at all. Her opponent realized that checkmate was only three moves away and threw a piece.

"··· I lost—."

"Th-thank you for playing me!"

Pausing to take a breath, the girl started talking to Ai with a bright smile on her face.

"You said your name is Ai Hinatsuru, didn't you? You're really good! Where'd you come from? Are you joining the Practice League?"

"Um ··· I, I'm going to take the test soon ···"

"You are?! Then we can play again!"

She's back to being a normal grade schooler, her competitive fire disappearing the moment the match came to a close. Only kids can flip that switch so fast.

"Ai."

"Ah! Master!"

I'm sure the girls would have fun chatting away, but my lunch break will end if I let them be.

"Good game. That was a nice bit of reading you did there."

My apprentice (temp.) looks up at me with happy puppy dog eyes: "Yay yay♡" after I pat her head and give her a compliment.

"You've gotta be hungry by now? Wanna go grab a bite?"

"Yay!"

"Go get your Match Card starred. Hers too——."

One of the classroom's rules is that the winner takes both cards to get starred. I look at Ai's opponent and see——.

"……!!"

She's frozen solid, staring at me with her green Match Card clutched in her fingers.

"Um, hello? She needs your Match Card——."

"You … you're Kujuryouryouou … Right?"

Are grade schoolers not capable of pronouncing my name or something?

"Ahh, yes. It's Kuzuryuo."

"!!"

The girl tumbles off her chair, listlessly climbs back to her feet and comes up to me.

"Um, I-I-I, um, I'm Miomijyukochi!"

Miss Miomijyukochi, is it?

I take the card from her and look at her name.

"…… Miss Mio Mizukoshi. Yes, you played a good match."

Complimenting her in my most professional teacher-esque voice, "Hooahh!" Mio makes a strange sound and extends her hand toward me while struggling to stand on wobbly knees.

"U-Umm! M-May I shake your hand?!!"

"Sure. Great job today."

"Haahh … Haaaaaa ……"

Mio's face turns red like a steadily increasing pressure gauge.

Many people have asked to shake my hand since becoming Ryuo, but I've never seen someone so enthralled. I'm honored …

But this is kind of embarrassing. Other people are laughing.

"I'll never ··· ever wash this hand again!"

"N-Never ···?"

"I'm about to go to the girl's room, but I won't wash this hand!!"

"No, please wash, okay?"

I give the just-starred Match Card back to Mio, her head bowed in gratefulness, ask her to keep Ai company and leave the classroom behind.

"Interesting girl, that one. She's got a pretty good feel for Shogi too. Think the two of you can become friends?"

"……"

"Hm? Something wrong, Ai?"

My apprentice (temp.) was happy and bubbly just a moment ago, but now she's frowning. All those happy "yays" are gone and she's whispering something under her breath.

"··· I've never once gotten a handshake ··· I'm the apprentice ··· Crafty little ···"

"Huh? Umm ··· Ai?"

"Master!"

"Y-Yes?"

"Um ··· Um ····· Gehh!!"

Out of nowhere, Ai snatches my right hand with both of hers. Then she starts pressing my palm with her thumbs.

What does this girl want to do?

"Well, um ··· Satisfied?"

"Yay ♪"

Grade schoolers, such a mystery ···

Stepping outside of the dim building, the spring sunlight was almost blinding. "Ahhhh!" I stretch my arms and ask my apprentice (temp.) a question, "Now then. What do you wanna eat?"

"Ummm ··· Is there anything you want, Master?"

"Hmm, I've pretty much eaten everything all the restaurants around here have to offer."

"U-ummm, in ··· In that case ···"

"In that case?"

"L-Lunches! ··· I ··· made lunches ··· So ···"

"You did? One for me too?"

"Of course!! I woke up early just to make it for you, Master!!"

"Woah ···!"

Classic case of the Master being deeply moved by his considerate apprentice (temp.).

Only in the third grade and already such a good, thoughtful girl ··· I can say that because Big Sis always sends me to the convenience store to pick up her lunch. Even now.

"Then why don't we eat outside? It's nice out."

"Yes!"

And that's how we ended up going to a nearby park with her still holding my hand.

A short walk away, Kamifukushima Higashi Park is filled with waves of green ··· That is to say that half of the potted plants someone at the taxi company next door has been looking after have started encroaching into the park, but it just goes to show how little Osakans care about details. Anyway, it's a small park

with a lot of flavor.

We sit next to each other on a bench beneath the sunlight filtering through the leaves overhead and open the lunches that Ai made.

"*Onigiri* rice ball and fried eggs …?"

"Do you not like them …?"

"No, no. I'm thrilled. I'm not really the type of guy that wants to play Shogi on a full stomach."

"I'm glad!"

Chomp! Ai holds one of the rice balls in both hands and takes a big hearty bite—except that her mouth is so small that she might never finish it no matter how many hearty bites she takes. Kind of like a cute little hamster. Very cute.

After a good amount of chewing, Ai looks up at me with just her eyes and cautiously asks, "Master, um … H-how is the match going …?"

"Hmm, not bad I think."

I take alternating bites from the fried eggs and *onigiri* as I answer. Both are delicious. The rice balls are filled with salmon, my favorite. Maybe she asked Keika about it?

"I'm using *yagura* and Sir Ayumu got a *yagura-anaguma* going … Ah, do you know what *yagura* and *anaguma* mean?"

"I don't (>-<)"

"Should've figured."

It'd be faster to explain it to her using the number grid rather than battle formation names, but doing so and exchanging ideas could be considered *receiving outside help* and violate the rules even though she is in elementary school. I'd be cut down.

"Basically, one is solid and the other is solid as a rock. The one solid as a rock attacks the solid one. That's where we're at."

"And you're the rock, right Master?"

"No, I'm the solid."

"Wheh?"

Now her face is solid as a rock. A piece of *onigiri* filling (salmon) falls to the ground with a soft plop.

She obviously thinks that Ayumu's got the advantage. Well, can't blame her. Solid as a rock after all.

"It's true that his King's defenses are stiffer and he's the one on the attack."

"Playing in that situation sounds like more fun …"

"At the same time, Ayumu's lost a lot of pieces trying to break my formation by force. The tables will turn the instant I cut off his attack."

"Can you cut it off?"

"There should be a way. According to my research anyway."

"Research?"

I talk through a mouthful of *origiri* to explain what it is to be a pro Shogi player.

"On days that pro Shogi players don't have matches, they're hard at work researching their next opponent, looking for weaknesses and studying their battle formations. Prodigy players who show up to the arena and let God guide their hand to victory are pretty much unheard of in today's Shogi world."

Then again, there are some people who really show up and play like a god. Like the current Meijin. That guy may as well be God.

"All the research my friends and I did is going into my next

move. I'll cut off Ayumu's attack this turn ··· You could say that it's a victory through detailed research rather than pure ability."

"……"

Ai is looking at the ground, dead silent.

Did I dash her dreams? She looks at me just as I was starting to worry.

"That's so cool!!"

"C ····· cool?"

"Master, that's your secret finishing move?! Turning the tide of battle in one turn with a hidden technique that you got from intense training ··· You're amazing, Master! The ultimate Drag ··· Ryuo!"

She was about to say *Dragon King*, wasn't she?

"But ··· well, huh. I suppose if you want to think of it like that ···"

"? Did I say something funny?"

"Nah ···"

I quickly wiped the corner of my eye so my apprentice (temp.) wouldn't see.

In pro Shogi matches, where the winner of the standard game, which is close to ninety turns, can be determined by one thoroughly researched move, fans tend to complain by calling it a research lecture or *copy Shogi*. They really let us have it over the Internet. And of course they do. It's not that interesting for us, either.

Unfortunately, we don't live in a nice world where anyone can win without researching.

Most pro Shogi players form teams that we call *practice groups*,

where we use computers to research all kinds of battle styles. There are even some formations we research all the way to checkmate: just one move in an official match—all supported by researching scenarios that won't show up on the board in hundreds of thousands of matches …

"So, Master, your opponent will give up after your next move, right?!"

"Give up? Well, we'll be even, or I might get a slight advantage."

"Oh no! Isn't your secret technique supposed to end it all?!"

The world isn't that simple.

"Well, I'd say that being on an equal footing in a match where Sir Ayumu made the first move is putting up a good fight."

"He's God Ca … Kannabe-*sensei*, right? Is he that good?"

"He's a pro Shogi player."

"… But he is, a little weird, isn't he?"

"He's a pro Shogi player."

That one phrase pretty much sums everything up.

"Ask ten pros about Ayumu's skills, and all of them would say something like—*Kannabe? Oh, he's good. Early game, mid-game, late game, the guy's got them all covered.*"

"So he's got no weak spots?"

"Oh, he's got a weakness … I just can't exploit it right now."

"Huh?"

"Now then! Let's head back, shall we?"

I've said a little too much. I lick the last bits of rice off my lips and stand up.

"Thanks for the lunch. It was really, really good."

"E-hehe."

Ai happily squints her eyes, giddy as I pat her on the head. Damn cute.

"Keika will come get you tonight, so please stay at Master's place. I'll swing by in the morning."

"… Okay!"

Just for a moment, Ai nodded like a good girl.

⌂ MISCALCULATION

"Chaaaa————————rge!!"

The first thing Ayumu did once the match started up again was to drive that pointy spear even deeper into my gut.

"And now, cha——nge! Evolve from Normal Lance to Golden Lance!!"

Narikyou, Promoted-Lance … Is that what he's trying to say? He flipped the piece over, so that's probably it.

The Lance has run me through, so now my King is vulnerable to an attack from behind. It's a difficult position to be in so soon after restarting.

"Heh …… I have you now! Dragon King!!"

"Who has who?"

"Inconceivable?!"

I saw the attack coming by the slimmest of margins.

I leave the Promoted-Lance right where it is behind my King and take a Pawn from my captured pieces and place it on the board to attack a completely different piece. And that piece would

be——.

"My … Rook?!"

"That's right!"

His advancing Lance is just a diversion, a jab.

"Ayumu! You're trying to get me to move my defenses with a jab and then unleash a straight punch! And your fist is none other than this Rook! In other words, with this Rook under control, your attack comes to an end!"

"Heh-heh … Now I see. You are a worthy opponent, Dragon King. I commend you for deducing my strategy! However! Do you honestly believe that your weak forces can contain my strongest piece?!"

"Have you forgotten, Ayumu? Forgotten the piece I took just before lunchtime——?"

"?! You … You couldn't mean ……!!"

"Fly, Pegasus! I summon you from the captured ranks to take that Rook!"

I like how things are playing out on the board, so I don't mind having a bit of fun. The record keeper's cold gaze doesn't bother me at all!

"What's wrong, your highness? Your elegant visage is showing some cracks?"

"Kehhhh …!!"

It goes without saying that the Rook is the strongest piece and letting it be taken not only removes a big chunk of your firepower, but it's also like giving your best weapon to your opponent.

Losing it in the late game is one thing, but losing it in the mid-game pretty much ends a Shogi match. Therefore Ayumu should

move it out of the way.

At least he should have.

"Keh ··· Keh! Keh! ··· Keh-ha-ha-ha-ha!! At last ··· the moment I've been waiting for!"

"?! ··· Waiting ··· for ···?"

Ayumu didn't move the Rook, but another prominent piece—the Bishop.

"Bishop?!"

He's abandoning the Rook?! Seriously?!

I couldn't help but look up at Ayumu.

He seems ··· surprisingly calm. No explosions of emotion anywhere on his face. And he's drinking tea again.

My gut's telling me that I should take that Rook with this move.

Ayumu's advance can't go on without it. I should still be able to absorb this attack by the skin of my teeth. I've still got a captured Pawn and Silver on my piece stand. I can hold out!

I grab my right leg and squeeze as hard as I can, thoroughly reading the board to make sure my gut instincts are right.

Read. Read. Read ···

"····· Okay!"

I had my answer after over an hour of internal deliberation: take the Rook with *keima*, Knight. How's that, Ayumu!

"Just as I planned!!"

"What?!"

"Take a gander at your stunned stallion ···!"

Ayumu strikes that same Vanguard pose, flips the Bishop over and smacks it back down on the board.

"The one riding on its back—is death!"

Ayumu's *ryuuma*, Promoted-Bishop is headed right for my defensive front. However!

"How naïve, Ayumu! I'm one step ahead of your attack!"

I slide my King out of his Knight's line of fire.

Shogi's saying *King's early escape nets eight turns in action*! So many of his attack options are now moot!!

"What now?! Can't keep attacking without your Rook, no ··· can you?!"

This is when I thought we'd return to the mid-game and regroup, but——.

Ayumu doesn't reach for the board, but for his own piece stand. It felt like a pillar of ice shot down my spine the moment I saw him make that move.

"Prepare thyself, for you shall be run through by yet another hidden Lance!!"

Lifting the Lance from his piece stand with the arched-finger dexterity of a pianist, he brought it straight down onto the board. Crap?!

"Dragon Slayer! Georgiooooooo———os!!"

"Not good ···!!"

That move sends a cold shiver down my spine.

Ayumu placed the Lance right behind the Pawn I put down to attack his Rook. Therefore, I can't block it with my spare Pawn (two players having Pawns in the same column violates the rules)! There's no way to guard against it ···!

"Kannabe-*sensei* plays a surprising new move, *Kannabe-Style 3 Six Lance*."

"I said, *Dragon Slayer! Georgios*! Weren't you listening?!!"

Once Ayumu finished telling off the journalist, he points his fan directly at me and says, "What say you, your majesty Dragon King? How does my new tactic *Dragon Slayer! Georgios* taste?"

"Gh …!!"

I bite my lip and start searching the board.

I want information. What is Ayumu's next target? Are my formations still intact? Can my King escape with a stronger defensive line? Is there any opening to counterattack——?

"And by the way, the name is derived from the great dragon-slaying martyr, the knight St. George. It is said that he thrust his lance into the mouth of the dragon that breathed poison before wrapping a girdle that he received from a princess around its neck and leading the beast around like a dog before delivering the final blow."

I didn't need that information …

"No! There needs to be an exclamation point after the Dragon Slayer!" Ayumu tells off the journalist, issuing an order. Maybe he's going for a *Swift! (Black Shogi Piece 3 Seven Climbing Silver* kind of name?)

He clearly planned this combination. That lukewarm strategy name that some middle schooler would think up is obviously his doing.

Basically … Ayumu's had this in mind since I put that Pawn down thirty moves ago?

No. Even further back … He's had this in mind since I started making the *yagura* formation more than seventy moves ago. He saw this change coming and led me right to it.

If that's true——Ayumu has researched all the way to checkmate.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Your allotted time has expired. Therefore, each turn must be completed in one minute for the remainder of the match."

The record keeper announces a chilling truth with burning vigor.

"…… s."

My "yes" disappears into thin air.

From now on, I only have one minute to make each move. Otherwise, I'll have to forfeit the match because I ran out of time.

"Thirty seconds— … Forty seconds— …"

The record keeper uses a unique intonation to read off the time.

It's just past 9 o'clock at night.

Since the match started at 10 o'clock in the morning and we had about an hour for lunch, the two of us have been playing for nearly 11 hours already.

Ayumu still has one hour of waiting time.

And I have——zero.

"Fifty seconds—. One, two—, three——."

"…!!"

I made my move at "seven."

Even under these harsh conditions where I don't have enough time to run to the john, I grit my teeth and keep playing through the pain.

Against the ropes, I keep defending. My nerves are strung out

as far as they can go in this hopeless, exhausting battle.

On the other hand, "It's always my turn!" Ayumu declares, pressing his attack in perfect condition.

The formations are already shifting from Ayumu's advantage to Ayumu's victory.

"Heh heh. Perhaps it's time I strike the final blow and retire to the dining room …"

There is no dinner break in the Throne League. I've been thinking nonstop for more than eight hours.

My nerves have already reached their limit, my concentration is fading and now I have to play one-minute Shogi.

——Where did I slip up?

——Was taking that Rook a mistake?

——… Nah, perhaps going with *yagura* against Ayumu was wrong in the first place …?

Under pressure from the record keeper's time reading, I've got nothing but regrets.

I can keep pointlessly moving pieces across the board.

But … As a titleholder, as the Ryuo, I can't do anything shameful.

——Am I really allowed to keep playing like this?

——But people will tear me apart on the Internet for giving up too soon if I throw in the towel now …

Those were the only thoughts running through my head. Rather than reading the board, I'm trying to figure out exactly *how I want to lose*.

I've lost my will to keep fighting at this point——the match is as good as over.

I'm pretty sure everyone in the room has already caught onto that. Even the journalist who'd been camping out in the waiting room is back at the table next to the board. All to document the moment I surrender.

——At least, make it beautiful ···

Match records are the only way that we Shogi players can prove to the later generations that we existed. They're like musical scores for musicians.

It's okay to lose. I can accept that.

But to be forever remembered as *only that level* and laughed at until the end of time, that I absolutely cannot accept.

Especially since the journalist will publish a story about this match in the newspaper.

Which means an unfortunate record will be on display for the whole world to see.

I'm going to lose, there's no way around it. Even if I can't avoid everyone seeing me in defeat ··· I can at least make it *look like* a good loss.

There's something similar to beheading a samurai at the end of their ritual suicide that we call *setting the scene*.

The two competitors synchronize their breathing and *pretend it had been a heated battle* all the way until one move before their surrender.

It's not fixing a match by any means. Losing with grace is one aesthetic of being a pro. You could say that being beautifully cut down is a technique in a pro's repertoire.

My mind set, *I move to attack Ayumu's King*.

"What's this?"

Ayumu looks surprised by my decision for a moment but, "Heh ··· I see. You've accepted your fate ···," he whispers with a tinge of sadness in his voice and engages my attack.

I bet all the Shogi fans watching the match on the association's live coverage on the Internet are shouting things like "**It's the check to remember**!" right about now.

Yes. This is the check to remember.

Doing this now means that the journalist can write a record saying, "It was a close match where the victor was in check at the very end." I've set the scene.

All I have to do now is stick my neck out. Just retreat back to my side of the board and find the shortest, most beautiful path to the end and move my pieces to follow through. Knowing Ayumu, he'll finish me off right away.

——Please make it painless, Ayumu ···

In the moment that thought crossed my mind and I was about to extend my neck, "Huh?"

I happened to glance up as I picked up a piece and caught something unbelievable out of the corner of my eye.

"··· Feeeeh?"

A strange sound comes out of my lips in disbelief.

Ai was there.

The apprentice (temp.) who should have gone back to Master's house with Keika is in the arena, watching my match with the record keeper and journalist beside the board.

What's this? There's a grade schooler in the arena?

I wonder if my eyes have gotten tired from watching too much

Shogi?

"Fifty seconds—. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine——."

"Ten!"

Brought back into the moment by the record keeper's countdown, I panic and make a move.

I was fully intent on setting the scene, but I rushed and moved the wrong piece. I can see the annoyed *he's still going?* looks on the record keeper and journalist's faces, but that's the last of my worries.

Why?

What's Ai doing here?

I check the time. It's already past ten. She should have gone to Master's house, brushed her teeth and hit the sack a long time ago.

But here she is, in the arena. Those little feet brought her into the *Onjyoudan no Ma*, plopped into a chair between the record keeper and journalist where the grade schooler is now leaning over the long desk and looking at the board with twinkling eyes.

"Hold up ··· huuuh? H-hey ···"

I look right at her. Hey, hello. Look at me.

But she doesn't even notice my gaze. She's completely focused on something else.

Ai's staring at one thing and one thing only——Ayumu's King.

Seeing that little body of hers rock back and forth, I know exactly what she's thinking.

She's reading.

Using her entire body. Pouring her body and soul into it.

"··· Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here ···"

Without showing any sign that she knows I'm looking at her, Ai puffs out her cheeks, her ears bright red all the way to the tips as she single-mindedly searches the board.

Looking for what? That's obvious.

My victory. More specifically, the path to it.

Ai's engrossed in reading, searching for that, and only that, on this board drowning in despair.

"… Here, here, hereherehere … No! Then how about … here, hereherehereherehere … Too slow! Faster … There has to be a faster way———."

There's a simple reason that our eyes aren't meeting.

I've only been looking at my King. Never once thinking of going on the attack, I've kept my head down, hiding in my shell like a turtle and just kept defending. I've only been worried about my pride as Ryuo and saving face. I've been looking down and regretting everything under the weight of my heavy position.

But Ai is different.

She's got her head up, focused only on Ayumu's King. She's looking for a way to attack, not just defend.

Believing in my victory. Believing her Master can win.

"… She's right."

This little girl came from far away on the north coast by herself, even ran away from home, all to become my apprentice. To Ai, I'm probably the best in the world, cool beyond belief, invincible Dragon King. Just like how I used to see Master Kiyotaki.

That's, that's just it.

I can't be looking down at a time like this! I can't just accept losing!!

"So ··· Shall I play you a requiem?"

Ayumu picks up a piece like a performing pianist and snaps it down at a slightly higher pitch, moving in a way to encourage my surrender. An *I'll still play along with your scene* type of move.

"··· Sorry, Ayumu. I've had a change of heart."

"What?"

But I refuse his offer, read the board as long as time allowed, and made a move that muddied the board.

I had my King run away, abandoning his vessels in a shameless, ugly move.

I chose a path that pros would rather die than take, an unsightly, embarrassing move that other players will roast me for until I wish I were dead. The kind of move a stubborn outlaw would make.

As expected, the record keeper sends an ice-cold glance my way before grudgingly recording my move. The journalist lets out a long sigh as if annoyed that he's got more pointless work to do.

As for Ayumu sitting on the other side of the board——.

"So you've chosen to fight against fate ··· How foolish ····· Keh!"

Pressing down on his right eye, the one with the color contact, he——.

"··· Keh keh keh, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes! So it must be! That's exactly why you are my eternal archenemy! I'd expect nothing less from the evil Dragkin!!"

Holy Knight. Sir Ayumu God Cauldron makes the strongest offensive move possible, the piece hitting the board with the bursting *clack!* all with a smile plastered on his face. Then, he

pinned back his long bangs and leaned out over the board.

Even though there are much safer ways to win, he threw that option out the window and charged directly in for the kill. Royalty are just too damn cool!

"Now! Shall we continue the eternal battle of good and evil that has raged since our past lives?!"

"I don't know about the *eternal* part——," I say while immediately making my next move with a fearless smile on my lips. "But I'll keep you entertained until the end of the night."

"60th Season"

Throne League Match

Red White League

Offense ☗ *6-dan* Ayumu Kannabe (3W)

☖ Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu (3L)

Who would've ever thought this would be such an intense match?

Onjyoudan no Ma. Here, at the holiest of sites in the Kansai Shogi world, two players went head-to-head in a battle for the ages. Their hands moved faster and faster like a quickening heartbeat, fierce and intense.

Kuzuryu would make one move using no time, and Kannabe would respond just as quickly. It went against logic. Their pride as contemporary pros prevented them from yielding any ground and kept their minds working at full speed.

"Intense," the support staff member muttered under his breath, in awe of a game that was ultimately decided by a move that Kannabe made a little too quickly under pressure.

"… To be honest, I was looking for the best place to surrender," said Kuzuryu in a weak voice once the match had concluded. Those words ring true.

So what gave him the strength to persevere?

"I thought I'd try holding out. As a titleholder … As Ryuo, I was more concerned about leaving behind a record worthy of my title until tonight. As a result, I always looked for the best way to lose once my formation was broken rather than keep fighting. But," Kuzuryu looked up, bringing his face into the light and declared with no waiver in his eyes, "I've come to the

realization that leaving behind an unconventional, muddy record is better than a loss. I don't want to lose anymore, to anyone. That's all there is to it."

Kuzuryu took on an apprentice just before the match got underway.

This apprentice was in attendance and watched the match board-side, a little girl in elementary school.

She sat on her ankles, in perfect posture the entire time, continuously believing that her master would find a way to win. Seeing her there may have had something to do with Kuzuryu's new outlook.

"That could be true. After all, I don't want my apprentice to see me lose," the still sixteen-year-old Ryuo said before smiling clumsily at his nine-year-old apprentice.

It may be too early to make any predictions based on this match alone.

However, in my opinion as a writer, I believe the young Ryuo has returned to form. No, he is still in the process of growing stronger, maturing before our very eyes.

(KUGUI)

"Whoa! It's freezing!!" I shout in surprise upon stepping outside the association, shivering. Naniwa Street is really busy during the day, but there isn't a soul around. It's already past five in the morning. It's already tomorrow, practically morning.

The match ended at 3:48 in the morning and lasted 402 moves.

Ayumu nearly hit his head the moment he bowed out. The record keeper and I carried him down to one of the lodging rooms on the third floor to put him to bed and answer questions for the reporter. When all was said and done, the clock said five.

"… Sheesh. Nobility fights you all the way to the end."

"Master, that was a great match!" said Ai, coming out of the association right behind me and *whoosh!* salutes.

Well, she's surprisingly energetic: bouncing off the walls.

"Ai … Aren't you sleepy?"

"I usually get tired around nine! But I'm wide awake today!"

"That's only because your brain was working so hard during the match so it doesn't realize that your body is tired."

I'm unusually chatty as well as the two of us walk toward my apartment.

"That's where a lot of people go out for drinks after a late-night match to unwind, or let off steam with a game of mahjong."

"Master, you're still too young to drink, right?"

"And I've got no clue how to play mahjong."

"Then how do you relax?"

"I … do this. Wander around the streets of Naniwa for a while …"

"That's even more troubling than drinks and mahjong!"

Indeed it is.

During our walk I asked Ai why she had stayed at the association.

It all happened just about how I expected. Ai begged Keika to let her watch my match to the end, and Keika asked Master Kiyotaki, who gave his permission. Master wanted to reward Ai for her enthusiasm. And, of course, Master's the one who pulled the strings so that she could watch from the board-side table.

I can't even be mad at her.

After all, she's basically the reason I won.

"So, what'd you think? Learn anything from watching a pro match up close and personal?"

"It was amazing! Coming back from that far behind … I knew you could do it, Master!!"

"Ha-ha-ha. But it was one hell'a muddy☆match!"

Normally, a whole match record fits on one sheet of paper, but I think you'll be able to tell just how stubbornly I held on by the fact that today's record keeper needed to start a third sheet. Apparently, we played more moves than any pro official match in the postwar era.

"Shogi is a game of comebacks. The last one to make a mistake loses."

"But, to mess up when that far ahead …? There were so many ways he could win, right?"

"That's exactly why he messed up."

"Fheeeh …? What, what does that mean?"

"There's no guesswork when there's only one way to win,

especially in a close game. But when you have so many options, you get stuck trying to figure out *which one is best.*"

"Ah …!"

"And *flukes* can happen where there are so many choices. So I made a few bad moves on purpose and left two spots exposed. All on purpose!"

"T-That's incredible, Master!! Getting your opponent to make a mistake by leaving yourself open … Like a real risk taker!!"

"Well, thinking about it logically, there's nothing you can do against two fronts at once (lol)."

"Then isn't that a bad idea? (>-<)"

"I won, so it's all right. All because I won."

I doubt this kind of cheap trick would have worked against Ayumu the way he normally is.

That's why I had to use *a second strategy* that I had sealed away. I took advantage of Ayumu's weakness, pushing him to the point where he might make mistakes.

"But professional matches are really something else! I can't believe you can put that much time into a single Shogi match!"

"Because we can start in the morning and keep playing until the next day. Bet you never thought it would go this late, yeah?"

"Nope! And how you yelled all these lines back and forth out of nowhere like that was really cool!"

"Well, usually no one says much of anything!"

Sir Ayumu's a talker. Then again, pretty much everything about that guy is strange.

Like how he'll give his opponent a pep talk in the middle of a match. Really … Really strange guy.

"Oh, and Master."

"Yeah?"

"What was God-*sensei's* weakness you were talking about at lunch?"

God-*sensei*?

"… His family runs a tofu business in Fukagawa and he's been going to high school until this month. He already graduated though."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Helping a family business produce and sell tofu, he'd have to get up pretty early, right? And he'd have to keep a strict schedule, going to school and all."

"Okay ……"

"So, *he gets sleepy late at night*. I knew he'd start messing up if I dragged the match into the late evening hours."

"Th … That's a weakness?!"

"I took advantage of the mistakes he made, didn't I?"

It's not just Ayumu. All school-age Shogi players have to deal with it.

And not only did I not go to high school, I live by myself. Since I don't have to abide by any schedule, I've already conquered that weakness!

"That's why most Shogi players become night owls once they turn pro. In the old days, masters would force their apprentices to play mahjong at night to toughen them up."

As good as that sounds, I've also heard stories that it was just so that the masters had enough players.

To be honest, stubbornly stalling a match into the early

morning hours just to exploit a weakness isn't worthy of praise.

"Wanted to win that badly, did he?"

"A titleholder relying on off-the-board techniques? Disgraceful. What trash."

I'm sure comments like that are flying back and forth on the Internet right now. It actually was a horrible way to play ···

"··· I'm scared to look at *Ch 2 Meijin* ··· Afraid to look at *Mr. Climbing Silver* too ···"

"Master? Are you shaking? Are you cold?"

"I'm, fine ··· Just fine ···"

I know my stomach is going to hurt if I look, but I just can't help it. I turn on my smartphone and search my own name. Does this mean I'm sick?

The net is up in flames, just as I expected. People are calling me more names, typing with more ferocity than ever before.

It's all there————but.

"But today's match was fun to watch, don't you think?"

I stop scrolling, my finger planted on top of words that I never expected to see.

"I was on the edge of my seat right to the end."

"Yeah, I enjoyed that."

"At last, I can take a bath."

"Nice match you guys!"

··· I played horribly, much worse than usual.

But for some reason, their words are much warmer than usual.

Just what is a playing style worthy of a titleholder ··· Worthy of

a Ryuo? I still don't know. I can't play a kind of Shogi I don't understand.

In that case, I should stop worrying about it. Just play my own style of Shogi. Be the muddy, stubborn outlaw who refuses to give up. If I can keep winning that way, then I'm sure that there will be people coming out of the woodwork who accept my style. Just like today. For sure.

I stop walking, lost in my train of thought when——.

"Master!"

Ai, who had already reached the other side of the crosswalk, spun to face me with her arms open wide like wings.


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"I want to play Shogi just like you real soon!"

"…… All right then."

Seeing that pure little angel of a girl reminded me of a feeling I'd forgotten.

The day that my father taught me how to play Shogi.

The day that I first played Master Kiyotaki in that teaching match.

The day that I met Big Sis at Master's house and played Shogi until my fingernails cracked.

The day I first walked through the Kansai Shogi Association doors holding Master's hand.

The day that Big Sis and I wanted to keep playing in the classroom, shouting "I don't wanna go home" over and over again.

The smile I wore the day that I won consecutive matches.

The tears after losing them all.

Didn't Big Sis and I always play Shogi to our hearts' content until the sun went down and go home hand-in-hand?

Those days of loving Shogi for what it was, pure enjoyment of the game came back to life seeing Ai like this.

I suppose if I can feel this way every day——.

"… Maybe taking an apprentice wouldn't be so bad."

Ai had been hopping forward on one leg until she suddenly turned around and put her hand to her ear.

"Master? Did you say something?"

"Nothin'!"

Lacing my fingers behind my head, I looked up at the brightening sky.

We'll be back at my apartment any moment.

There've been more days when I haven't wanted to go back to that cold, almost empty apartment after late-night matches since I went pro and started living on my own.

There've been times when I wanted to disappear into the darkness once the losing streak started. I was afraid to see the sunrise. Afraid of my next match. I hated seeing the Shogi board in my room so much that I hid it in the closet.

But now, I want to get home as quickly as possible.

Grab a quick bite to eat, take a bath, hit the sack.

And then play some more Shogi.

RECORD 4



PROFILE

Ayumu God Cauldron *Viscount*

REGISTRATION NUMBER:	329
ALIAS:	Silver Chevalier
HOMETOWN:	Deep River
FINISHING MOVE:	Right Wing Holy Lance An attack only usable by Knights worthy of wielding the Holy Lance. The enemy dies.
SECRET TECHNIQUE:	Dragon Slayer!-Georgios A secret technique devel oped solely to slay the Dragon King. Wield a dragon-killing Lance. The enemy dies.

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"Sorry, Master! Did you wait?!"

"Nah, I just got here."

I had been standing in front of a shop on the first floor of the association headquarters reading a Shogi book when Ai came downstairs from the second-floor classroom. I greet her with a smile.

It's been a week since she arrived.

Being with my apprentice every day has become routine.

The two of us bring lunches to the association in the morning. Ai goes to the second-floor classroom to prepare for her Practice League test while I go up to the third to research the latest Shogi strategies.

The two of us go to the park to eat lunch if our schedules line up.

Meeting like this to go home in the evening has become our *standard routine*.

"My, my. It's almost like the two of you are a young couple meeting up for a date."

The beautiful woman who followed Ai down the stairs saw our exchange and smiles at us like a goddess.

It's my Master Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*'s (secretly well-endowed) daughter Keika Kiyotaki.

She's currently in the Practice League and going out of her way to help Ai get ready for the test.

"Sorry for the trouble, Keika. I know you've got your hands full helping Master with his classroom too …"

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine."

Keika heartily waves her hand.

"If I don't get out of the house every once in a while like this, I'll never reach C1, now will I?"

Each Practice League member has a rank.

They go "F" through "A" with "S" being the top. People in "F" are still newbies, maybe around amateur 2-*dan* in terms of skill.

They need to reach C1 to become a player in the Women's League.

Keika is in C2. She's been trying to break through the last wall for years now.

"I'm already 25. The age limit is only a few years away … Playing against talented kids like Ai will give me that extra push."

Keika started taking Shogi seriously in her last year of high school.

Since she joined the Practice League to become a Women's League Player right after graduating, she didn't officially become one of Master's apprentices until well after Big Sis and me. That's why Keika is technically my "little sister." Our master/apprentice family tree is really complicated.

"Oh, that's right. Ai, you were promoted in the classroom today, weren't you?"

"Yep! I'm now an amateur 3-*dan*!"

"Ohh? Well done."

Ai proudly shows me her Match Card. "He he ♡" she smiles, happily closing her eyes as I pat her on the head. Gotta praise a hard-working apprentice after all!

"You know what? I'll buy you something to celebrate."

"You will?! Yippee!"

"Something cheap, got that? Cheap. Five hundred yen or less."

Watching Ai dance a discombobulated dance of joy on her way into the shop, I couldn't help but feel happy myself.

It's strange.

Seeing someone else's victory stars or seeing someone get promoted would have made me jealous not too long ago, but I'm just as happy for Ai's promotion as if it were my own. It feels good, honestly. Maybe I've taken my first step into adulthood?

"She's moving up fast," Keika says in a quiet voice right next to me so that Ai couldn't hear.

"What's your impression of her, going head-to-head?"

"She's getting stronger game by game …… No, it's more like move by move. I know she's very talented——."

A slight shadow passes across her face with those words.

"… If I'd started Shogi at her age …"

"……"

I couldn't say anything to that.

The Shogi world is dominated by talent. And the younger that talent is developed, the more it grows.

Of course, there are some pros who started playing in high school.

However, an overwhelming number of us, including myself, had our mind set on becoming pros all the way back in elementary school and started training in earnest. We developed our talent and skills playing against prodigies all over Japan.

"Master, Master! This! Will you buy this for me?!"

Ai chose a Shogi piece keychain (four hundred yen + tax).

"That's fine, but are you sure you want a Rook? That left Knight is a lucky one."

"Gahhh! I can't decide (>_<)."

My apprentice happily squeals with a keychain clutched in both hands. Cute, very cute.

Keika watches with a soft smile on her face and says to me, "And? Yaichi, what are you going to buy for Ginko?"

"Come again?"

That's an odd question.

"Why do I need to get anything for Big Sis? I'm pretty sure she should be the one buying things for me, me being the younger apprentice."

"… You know, Yaichi," Keika lets out a long sigh before her tone gets quite a bit sharper, "if you're going to buy Ai something, you should get something similar for Ginko. It's going to get tense around here if you don't preserve that balance."

"Really?"

"Really."

Really, she says.

"Ginko's been really stressed out ever since Ai came here. She's not Snow White anymore … more like Queen Elsa storming out of the castle … You can't recover from mistakes in the early game, you know?"

"But if I turn the tables in the late game …"

"Shogi thinking doesn't apply in the real world."

Understanding women is just as difficult as Shogi. An eternity wouldn't be enough time to fully comprehend either of them.

"My word … Why is it that the two of you can be so interested

in Shogi but have no idea about the opposite gender …"

"I, um, like you a lot, Keika?!"

"Sure, sure."

She brushed me off like nothing!

I invited her to join the two of us for dinner, but Keika said she "has to take care of her father," and left by herself right away. Apparently, Master goes on Internet shopping sprees if left alone for too long.

"Master? Are you going to buy another one?"

"… Nah."

I put the *Silver* keychain I picked up back on the rack.

I know Big Sis better than anyone. That's why it's better this way. Yeah.

⌂ CURRY MASTER

"5 Four Pawn."

I help Ai get ready for her Practice League test during our walk back to the apartment too.

"I move 4 Six Pawn!"

"5 Three Silver."

"4 Five Pawn."

"3 Two Gold."

"3 Six Pawn."

"5 Two King."

"3 Five Pawn!"

We are playing *Blind Shogi* for practice.

Several people do a double take as we pass by, having no idea

what we're talking about. But it's not that hard to do once you get to a certain level. Ai already has a Shogi board etched into her brain, so this has gotta be a cinch for her.

And we're just going over the standard early game, so it's more of a memory test than anything else.

"And if I move 2 Two Silver?"

"4 Eight Silver!"

"6 Two Gold."

"4 Seven Silver."

"6 Four Pawn. Now what do you do from this spot?"

"I move 3 Eight Rook!"

"Exactly! Changing to the Sleeve Rook and focusing your attack on lines 3 and 4 is called the Two Pawn Advance Standard."

Advanced players will leave out their strongest pieces, the Rook and Bishop, when playing less experienced players as a handicap.

The two standard styles in those games are Two Pawn Advance and Silver Tandem.

It seems like Ai's playing style lines up with the relentless attacking Two Pawn Advance rather than strengthening defenses with the Rook in the middle of the board before attacking with Silver Tandem.

But having good defense is also important.

"Tell me the best way to surround the King on your own."

"6 Eight Silver, 6 Five Pawn, 7 Eight Gold, 6 Four Gold, 6 Nine King, 7 Three Knight and 5 Eight Gold!"

"And that formation is called?"

"*Kyanigakooi*!!"

That's *kani gakoi,* the Crab Castle.

"Good. Think you got a good handle on standard handicap matches?"

"Yep! Understanding the early game makes it easier to win!"

"That it does."

Nothing makes a Master happier than seeing their apprentice grow.

As a bonus, I'm not doing that bad in my own matches. I won two in a row. Two!

Titleholders aren't supposed to get so excited over consecutive victories, but after being dragged through the gutter with so many losses in a row the world now has a cheerful sparkle to it.

"Ai, any ideas for dinner tonight?"

"I was thinking about making curry … Do you like curry, Master?"

"Oh yeah. Sounds great. Should we pick up some ingredients on the way home?"

"Please! I'll treat you to real Kanazawa curry!"

We stop by a small supermarket at the entrance to the shopping district, buy what we need and head home to start cooking.

Ai had said, "*I'll take care of all the housework while I'm here! Let me do it!*"

A very admirable sentiment to be sure, but I wouldn't feel right. What kind of monster would make a grade schooler do all the cooking and cleaning?

So, we decided to split the duties.

"All righty! Let's do this!!"

"Let's get started!"

The two of us stand shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen.

Ai needs a stool to use the countertop because she's too short, but the girl's as good with a knife as any adult I've seen. She must've picked up that skill growing up at an inn. Seriously, she puts me and Big Sis to shame. Then again, I can't call what Big Sis does "cooking."

Ai's culinary skills are perfectly honed, even when it comes to making curry.

She sliced and diced potatoes about five times faster than I can peel carrots and is already chopping her way through cabbage faster than my eyes can see.

Huh?

"… Cabbage?"

"Kanazawa curry always has cabbage on the side."

Cabbage with curry … Well, that might work! A refreshing burst with every bite maybe?

Then she boils all the neatly cut ingredients before tossing them all into a big pot to simmer. Bubble, bubble.

Ai does a few Shogi puzzles while we wait (got close to burning a few times).

Add in some curry powder, and it's ready to eat!

Or at least I thought it was.

"Hmmm …"

Wrinkling her forehead and squinting her eyes, Ai stares at the yellowish concoction in the pot. That face is more intense than when she was doing the Shogi puzzles.

"… I should've known that store-bought curry powder would be pale."

"Huh? Looks par for the course to me!"

"No, this won't do. It needs to be darker."

··· Darker?

"Master. You have any sauces?"

"Huh? Y-yeah ··· This is Osaka. Everybody's got sauce."

"Yahh!"

"Hey?! Why're you flooding the curry?!"

Ai dumps an unbelievable amount of sauce directly into the pot and starts stirring.

The yellowish curry turns dark brown right before my eyes.

"There we go ♪ . That's the color that gets people's mouths watering."

"....."

Really? Is that really how it works?

Ai turns the heat down to the weakest setting and keeps stirring. But it's not the kind of ladle stirring that keeps things from getting burnt. She's mashing everything down with *purpose*. Sweat droplets are rolling down those small cheeks. Never seen curry made like this before ···

"Isn't it ··· about done?"

"Nope. It needs a bit more ···"

"More, mashing?"

"More ··· Everything needs to be worked into a thick soup ··· What I wouldn't give for a pressure cooker to cook everything together *gayo* ··· It just doesn't come together right without stainless silver plates *gaine* ···"

Gayo? *Gaine*?

Is something wrong? My apprentice is making weird sounds ···

Ai whispers under her breath as if doing her own review session

until finally she smiles and says "Yep!" I guess that means she figured it out?

"This is as good as it's going to get! Let's eat!"

"S-Sure! Let's chow down."

Ai scoops rice onto a plate, covers it in curry, puts the pork cutlets that we bought at the supermarket on top, decorates the whole thing with cabbage and adds more sauce for flavor. Being a Shogi player and a bit superstitious, I'm pleasantly surprised by my apprentice's tasteful *katsu* curry. Natural-born competitor indeed.

And, of course, there's a fork next to my plate.

"Huh? We're eating with forks?"

"Why wouldn't we?"

"Don't people normally use a spoon?"

"Stop kidding around, Master. Curry is always eaten with a fork."

"It ··· is?"

"Yes, it is."

Okay, I guess it is. A-ha-ha-ha-ha–. Something seemed a little off as I shared a laugh with my apprentice, but we put our hands together and dug in!

A little concerned about trying to eat curry with a fork, I was surprised to find that it was so thick that wasn't a problem at all.

I lift the fork up to my mouth and——.

"Master."

"Yeah?"

"Don't get *carried away*, okay?"

Huh?

Well that's a bizarre thing to say. At any rate, I move my hand

the last few inches to put the fork in my mouth. The curry flavor washes over me. Wow, this is pretty good.

The spice slowly starts to kick in and …

slow …

ly …

gets …

"····· Ah ····· Wha ·····?"

I woke up to the sound of my fork hitting the table.

Apparently, I passed out with the fork still in my mouth. Curry that was piping hot in front of me has cooled off to the point that a thin layer has formed on the surface.

"How ··· how long ··· was I out ···?"

"Heehee."

Ai already finished her curry and is now sitting with her head propped up on her hands with her elbows on the table, looking right at me. There's a smile on her lips that's as infinitely deep as this curry's flavor ···

I dove back into the curry like it had become my new obsession after that. While I didn't get "carried away" again after the first bite, my fork-holding hand never slowed down. Swallow one mouthful and bring up the next without using any time at all. This happened over and over until every speck of the dark curry disappeared from my plate.

I ate it all.

I've never felt anything like this full-body psychedelic hug of happiness ever before.

What in the world is this ··· I know, curry, and this isn't curry ···

"D-Did you ··· S ··· Spike this with anything ···?"

"Oh, no no. I didn't put anything like that in. Heeheehee."

"Tomorrow ··· I wanna eat more tomorrow ··· and the next day ··· Forever ···"

"Sure! The leftovers will be even more delicious tomorrow ♪."

Would I wake up after eating something like that ···?

"H … How was the classroom today? Make any friends?" I ask my apprentice as I gulp down some water and try to still my beating heart. Who would've thought curry could be so exhilarating …

Ai went from looking like the Bodhisattva Miroku's archaic smile to a much cloudier expression with those words and looked down at her feet.

"……"

"Something wrong?"

"… Master."

Don't tell me she's been bullied in the classroom? It's pretty common for people to gang up on strong newcomers. Even Big Sis had to deal with the *Crush Ginko Sora Group*.

That's why I wanted to make sure Keika was with her …

"Umm … Well …"

Ai works up the courage to say what's on her mind, looks me square in the eyes and makes a bizarre confession.

"P-Practice session! Can we have one here?!"

"… A practice session?"

"Yes!"

She looks back at the floor and tries really hard to explain her reason in a tiny voice.

"Y … You see, I, um … told people I was staying with you, Master … and, well, um …"

"It sounds like someone said *I want to see where the Ryuo lives!* and one thing led to another. Is that what this is about?"

"Of course! You know that's fine any time, right?"

"M-Master ··· Thank you so much!!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Board, pieces, chess clock. If you need anything at all, let me know," I proudly declare to my cute apprentice and pound my chest.

Thump!

At this point in time, I had no idea of the repercussions that hosting a grade school girl practice group would entail.

Not yet anyway.

GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP

Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle.

"Master. No one will be here for an hour yet."

"Oh? I ··· see."

The day has arrived.

Since my apprentice's friends are coming over to the apartment today, I've been on edge ever since I woke up. Yes, me.

Three girls are coming. Two of them are the same school grade as Ai and apparently already in the Practice League.

Ai had been hard at work in the kitchen making everyone sandwiches for lunch until she looked at me sitting next to the 8½-inch Shogi board in the *tatami* room with a curious look on her face and asked, "Master ··· Why are you wearing a suit at home?"

"Ah, would traditional Japanese clothes be better?"

"Normal ones are fine ···"

"Don't you think everyone's a little late? Did they get lost?"

"There's still plenty of time."

"It might be a good idea to go meet them at the station——."

No sooner did I say that and climb to my feet than ···

Ding dong ♪

"Oh! That's them for sure!"

Ai takes off her apron and rushes to the door, her feet thumping all the way.

I quickly straighten my posture sitting on my ankles on top of the floor mat and start lining up old match records in front of my 8½-inch Shogi board. Sort of a *We-always-practice-like-this, what-of-it?* type of setting. Usually, I use a gridded cloth for these things to keep the noise down.

"Thank you for having us!"

"Thank you for having us!"

A very energetic greeting.

Two girls appear behind Ai.

"N-N-Nice to see you again. I'm Mio Mizukoshi! Th-th-thank you for hosting!!"

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Ayano Sadatou. I've been looking forward to today."

The first is the sporty girl I met in the classroom, Mio.

The second, Ayano, is a tall, lady-like girl I've never met before.

"Nice to meet you too. I'm glad to see Ai has made such nice friends."

I greet them from my seat on the pillow.

"Squee!!"

"He said Ai! Just Ai! No *Miss* or anything!"

Well, they're unusually excited. Ai's face turns bright red. "I-I'm his apprentice! That's normal! Come on!!"

What's going on?

I can't keep up with these grade schoolers ··· Just when I was getting worried.

Peek.

An extremely cute blonde girl with green eyes pokes her head out from behind Ayano, comes up to me, and gives me a hug.

"Cha, Shaulot Izuoor."

··· Come again?

"She's Charlette Isoir."

Ayano steps in to translate.

"She attends a school for French children in Kyoto, a first grader. She also comes to my Master's classes."

"Cha go, every day!"

Why's this girl so damn cute? Why won't my heart stop pounding?

I try to get a handle on the thing slamming against my ribs and start a conversation with little Charlette still clinging to me.

"S ··· So, Mio and Ayano, you're already in the Practice League? Who're your Masters?"

"Kuresaka-*sensei*!"

"Kayaoku."

It's more polite for apprentices to introduce their Master's name to other people without a title. Mio's still learning about these things, but Ayano's already got it down pat. It's always fun to see different personalities in action.

"Kayaoku-*sensei* ··· That would make you Ms. Kugui's?"

"That's correct. Machi is my elder sister apprentice. I have heard much about you from her, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. She wanted me to bring you this."

With that, Ayano hands me a bag filled with tasty treats from Kyoto.

"Also, this is from my parents."

"Oh, m-my parents also wanted to give you something as a thank you!!"

"Cha has gwift for you too?"

Cookies and madeleine cakes were thrust into my hands after the Kyoto-style treats. Charlette gave me large acorns with faces drawn on them with magic marker. "Cha's tweasure!" she tells me.

Saving their presents for snack time at 3 o'clock, we head right for the Shogi board.

There are many types of practice groups.

Some focus on deepening their understanding of one specific battle formation. There are some where participants talk about the latest trends without playing a single match. Some ignore Shogi altogether and just play Monopoly——.

It goes without saying that most practice groups mainly play matches. Participants play as many matches as they can throughout the day. During the matches, everyone says what they would've done in each situation and they all exchange opinions.

Practice groups also go by many names.

Master/apprentice family trees form "School Groups," gatherings in Abeno Harukas are aptly named "Haru Groups," beer lovers come together for "Keg Groups," in "Tochigi Groups" all participants are from Tochigi Prefecture, just to name a few practice groups.

So, this will be a practice session made up of nothing but elementary school girls. "*Grade Schooler Session*" is it? Well, this'll

be legendary ···

"Everything you need is already here. Help yourself."

I've got two Shogi boards (equipped with legs) set up in the *tatami* room. Since match clocks and notebooks (it's much more common to use regular lined paper for practice groups rather than special record-keeping paper) are all ready to go, so they can jump right in——or so I thought.

"Um, Master ··· Charlette ···"

Ai apologetically glances toward the little blonde girl ··· So little in fact, that she almost disappears behind the board.

I guess I shouldn't have gone all out and set up these big boards for today.

"Hmm ··· It might be a good idea to get a chair or something for her to sit on."

"How about stacking floor cushions?"

Ayano offered her own floor cushion, but mine are so thin that stacking them wouldn't make much difference.

"It's probably still hard for her to maintain proper posture anyway. Ai, why don't I get your stool in the kitchen for her to sit on——?"

I was just about to stand up when a hand tugged on my shirt.

"Masta."

"Yeah?"


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"Cha sit here."

Wheeh?

"Masta, soft knees."

"Haaaa ·····! Hah, wheeeh ·····"

"Pway Shogi wight here!"

Apparently, little Charlette has declared that she'll "play Shogi right here" after climbing onto my knees.

What is this cute little creature?

That's really, really cute. She's even calling me "Masta"? What is she? An angel?

Of course, I do not have a Lolita complex.

Absolutely, one hundred percent no. Older women is where it's at, I'm well aware. Little girls do nothing for me.

But ····· What the heck is this? What's with this sweet lightning bolt in my chest?!

"O ····· Okay then. Would you ··· l-l-like to play on my lap ···?"

"Pway Shogi!"

Snap, snap. An angel sitting on my knees starts lining up pieces on the board.

KER-CLAP! A much louder snap came from the next board over, as if to drown out the cute little clicks. *KER-CLAP*! Enthusiastic echoes bounced around the room.

"Ai. Easy on those pieces, the neighbors will complain."

"Sure!!"

KER-CLAP!!

"I just told you to quiet down, didn't I?"

It could be because her master is right next to her, but Ai is

raring to go, facing down Mio with her bright red cheeks puffed out. She's even playing a bit more aggressively than usual.

"So Charlette, why'd you start playing Shogi?"

"NARUTO!"

"Huh?"

"The Naruto manga series. She was inspired by a scene where the characters play Shogi."

··· I don't remember that scene.

I got a little concerned, but apart from the fact that Charlette couldn't reach the edges of the board, she plays a pretty good game. She'd compete with the amateur 3-*dan*s, no joke.

"Masta, gimme at one."

"There you are."

I pick up the piece she wanted. We're already working as one. Snapping sounds coming from the next board are getting even louder. They must be close to the end of the match.

We do a quick review session after the first games conclude, switch partners and start up again.

Mio versus Ayano and Ai versus Charlette plus me.

"Let's give it our all, Charlette?"

"Oui!"

"··· Master *darabuchi*."

There it is. *Dara* showed up again. Just what the heck does it mean?

Ai's even more ramped up than before, snapping the pieces down with enough zeal to scare Charlette. Meanwhile, I'm sweating buckets, praying that this angel on my knees doesn't start crying ···

Mio's got her head in her hands, staring at the board now that Ayano has her in check next to us.

"That's not good! *Funasshi* …"

"Funasshi?"

"Ah, it means she is out of Pawns," Ayano explains.

Being out of Pawns = *fu ga nai* = lack of Pawns = *fu nashi* = Funasshi.

How the heck should I know?

"Hey, Ayanon. What mascot did you think would be the best at Shogi? Think it'd be Sho-chan (the Japan Shogi Association's mascot)?"

"Kumamon has 1-*dan*."

… Looks like Mio and Ayano are having a good time.

ENDLESS SHOGI

Our practice session was so much fun the evening snuck up on us.

"Shouldn't you three be heading home?" I reluctantly say with Charlette still sitting on my knees.

"Oh. I'm fine," said Mio as she pulled her backpack toward her and opened the fasteners, "because I brought my pajamas and toothbrush with me."

That's not the point.

"Hold up, hold up … What do you mean fine? Your parents didn't give you permission to stay over all night, did they?"

"They said staying at a pro Shogi player's place was all right."

"Big Sister Machi said I should take advantage of this opportunity to stay overnight at the Ryuo's residence."

"Cha's okay too!"

"…… Ai."

"Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry!!"

My apprentice lowers her head so fast I thought she might go through the floor.

Supposedly, staying overnight was their plan from the start.

"…… Well, all right then. But I'd like to talk to your parents first. Could you write down your phone numbers for me?"

"Wahoo——!!"

Sure enough, I found out all three of them had permission from their parents after making the calls. More parents seem to be open-minded about Shogi nowadays.

I think I'll message Keika while I'm at it.

"*Help! Three of Ai's friends are here and want to stay overnight! Grade schoolers have taken over my room and I don't know what to do!!*" … And sent.

Heh-heh-heh. Now if Keika'd drop by to spend the night as well, the two of us will get closer!

There's no doubt in my mind that once she gets taken in by Charlette's cute and pure innocence she'll say, "*Haaa … I'd love to have a baby like her … Any good people around …? Someone good at Shogi who'll always love me, has a high social standing, and holds one of the seven great Shogi titles …*" That would be me!!

"Oh, and Ai. Are we okay for dinner tonight?"

"There's curry."

Nope, not happening.

"L-Let's order something! Pizza?! Sushi?! Eel?! Just name it!"

"Cha wants tagoyakki!"

The Angel wishes for *takoyaki*. I placed the order and ran out to pick some up.

Four girls eating together can be summed up in one word: lively.

"*Munch, munch* … Mio, I think you made the right move, promote the Rook at 2 one!"

"I felt the same way at first. But it would have been a mistake. Ai, your thoughts?"

"Um, I thought about that move too … But I think 3 Five Knight would be better ……"

"The Knight?!"

"Just like that?!"

"3 Five Knight followed by 2 Four Rook, take it with 2 Four Knight, 2 Eight Rook, line up with the 2 Five Rook and promote the other, and then move the Bishop to 4 Four and take that with the Knight …"

"To 4 Four Bishop?!"

Instead of talking about girl's manga or fashion, these grade schoolers are calling out places on a Shogi grid over dinner. They can't talk about Shogi with their school friends or family members, so everyone's really getting into it.

Once we were done eating, it was right back to the Shogi boards.

These girls have been playing since this morning without getting bored. Considering it's already evening, they'll keep playing forever if I don't stop them.

Waiting for the best opportunity to cut in, I speak up while the Grade Schooler Practice Group was reviewing their latest round.

"That's enough Shogi for today. It's time to start taking baths and getting ready for bed."

"Okay!!"

Then immediately they start lining up pieces again.

"Hey, hey, what do you think you're doing?" I ask and——.

"Playing to see who gets to take the first bath!"

It took two rounds of matches, but they all eventually got in the tub.

But all four came back for more Shogi after changing into pajamas. They won't stop playing.

"Okay, okay. Enough's enough. It's time for bed."

"Sure!!" the grade schoolers energetically respond and start lining up pieces again.

When I ask them why——.

"Playing to see who brushes their teeth first!"

"Playing to see who gets to use the hairdryer first!"

"Playing to see who sleeps where!"

This'll never end.

··· Then again, I used to be like this too, so I can't insist. Big Sis and I used to decide everything we did with a game of Shogi.

On the other hand, if they don't actually get some sleep soon ··· Just as that thought crossed my mind ···

"*Sensei*. May I ask you something?"

"Hm? What is it, Ayano?"

"Would it be possible to play against you, the Ryuo, in an instructional match? I'd like to take advantage of this opportunity."

"That's fine, under one condition ··· You go to bed when we're finished, okay?"

I'd like to see how much they've improved today, and this is a good chance.

Laying out futons in the *tatami* room, we set up Shogi boards fanning out with me in the middle and start a four on one instructional match. Charlette plops down in front of my Shogi grid cloth. How precious!

"What are the handicaps?"

"Fo ··· No, two pieces please!"

"Two pieces!"

"S-Same for me!"

I take my Rook and Bishop off the boards facing Mio, Ayano and Ai. For Charlette, I'm only using the King, Golds, Silvers and Pawns in a six-piece handicap.

Personalities come out during instructional matches.

There are some pros who refuse to go easy on their opponents, while others lose on purpose to give the less experienced players confidence. There are even a few who will let their opponent win if they follow standard strategy but will crush anyone who challenges them to a contest of strength.

There are some pros who are usually really nice, but become hot-blooded when teaching others. Cool-headed millennial players like myself can't help but wonder why they get so into it.

True beginners like Charlette are one thing, but I won't lose on purpose to someone already ranked. However, I take a lot of pride in giving kind words of encouragement during the review session.

I do just that after thoroughly dismantling all three of my two-

piece handicap opponents.

"Mio, I like your aggressive attacking style. But you should try to fix your habit of attacking without thinking about the overall balance. Going on the attack is fine, but don't leave any pieces stranded. Okay?"

"Y … Yes! Thank you!"

"Ayano, you've also got a good feel for Shogi. But why not try some new strategies? You've already got good instincts, so believe in yourself and branch out. Keep at it!"

"I-I will!"

"Ai. What was with that lazy match? Again!"

"S-Sorry! I don't have any excuse!!"

"Play like that again and I'll renounce you as my apprentice, clear?"

Mio watches Ai and I start lining up pieces again while Ai has a look of surprise on her face and asks, "U-umm … Weren't we supposed to go to bed, after that match …?"

"Anyone who wants to sleep can go ahead and sleep!!"

"Yikes!"

"If you want to get stronger, find a strong opponent and keep playing. Ai, do you want to get stronger?"

"Yes, yes I do!! Ready when you are!!"

Seeing Ai lower her head, the other grade schoolers line up their own pieces.

"I … I want to get stronger too!"

"I do as well!!"

"Cha too!"

"All right, all of you, listen up! Ten instructional matches until

morning. Here we go!!!"

"Yeah!!"

We played a hell of a lot of Shogi after that.

TRAGIC MORNING

Ka-sha! Ka-sha!

That sound wakes me up.

"…… Nh? Already … morning …?"

We must have kept playing until everyone collapsed from exhaustion and ended up sleeping in a pile in the *tatami* room. Charlette is right in front of me, her innocent sleeping face in my line of sight and one of her tiny hands clinging to my shirt.

I give one of her angelic cheeks a gentle poke. *Jiggle*. Warm and satisfyingly squishy.

"…… So this is love ……"

No sooner were those blissful words out of my mouth than *ka-sha!* I look up toward the noise and see——Big Sis holding her smartphone.

"Ah …… Big Sis? What … are you doing …?"

"Preserving evidence."

"Hollup."

Hold up——it's not what it looks like——is what I wanted to say, but Big Sis's fingers dance across the screen before I can make any excuse.

"The Shogi world has a new title: *Loli King* has just been born … I'll message everyone that needs to know, okay?"

"DOOOON'T! Please don't seeeennnndddd!!"

That'll be my alias for all eternity! I'll be known as the Loli King forever!!

"This is a practice group! We were doing research!!"

"Researching little girls?"

"No, no, no! Not research *on* little girls, research *with* little girls! That's important!!"

"Both sound sick to me."

"I realized that the moment I said it, but!!"

I can't deny that this looks bad, really bad. That's why I'm desperate.

"But why?! Why are you here, Big Sis?! We didn't make any plans for versus today——."

"Keika called me. Said she got a message from you, bragging that *you didn't know what to do now that three little girls had taken over your room,* and asked me to check on you, that something seemed fishy."

"KEIKAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Mio and Ayano start waking up, rubbing the sleep from their eyes as I lament on top of the futon, then their eyes suddenly shoot open.

"Fmuu ··· heh?! Oh, wow! A-Are you ··· S-Sora-*sensei*?!"

"Th-that's really her! That's the real Lady Snow White of Naniwa!!"

"....."

Big Sis gives them an annoyed glance, but there's no anger. She's *extremely* shy and not good at dealing with children. Without Shogi, she'd have zero communication skills. Then again, the Shogi world is full of people like that.

Amazed at their situation, waking up to find their two-women's-title-holding idol right standing over them, Mio and Ayano rush Big Sis in a frenzy, asking for autographs and handshakes. Big Sis silently obliges with a handshake.

Ai and Charlette woke up soon after. Groggy, Ai looks up at Big Sis and says, "Ah! Auntie!!" while Charlette wipes the drool from her chin on Big Sis's clothes, stressing her out to the max.

And that stress was all pointed at——.

"Kuzu Loli King ··· Couldn't you just die ···"

"··· Yes. My apologies. I'll go die now. Sorry."

Me. All of it. Yes, yes. Checkmate, checkmate.

Big Sis made two demands, the first being that the Grade Schooler Practice Group came to an immediate end and two, she said, "You need to be reconditioned. The two of us will practice Shogi at the association for three days straight starting tomorrow."

With that, the elementary school girls' Shogi sleepover came to an abrupt end.

"Can I come again?!" Mio askes, smiling innocently on her way out the door, but all I could do was give her a vague smile in return.

RECORD 5

PROFILE

Keika Kiyotaki

BIRTHDATE:	November 9
HOMETOWN:	Osaka Prefecture
MASTER:	Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan
CURRENT RANKING:	Practice League C2
MEASUREMENTS:	**B 38 IN, W 25 IN, H 36 IN**
FAVORITE FORMATION:	I like the Static Rook style, keep the Bishop contained, and taking my time to think everything through. But aiyagura takes so much thinking, I never know what to do (/_;)



Keika Kiyotaki

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DAY BEFORE THE TEST

"Did you hear that Universal Studios Japan has a new ride?"

Only Big Sis's voice and an electronic hum could be heard in a private room for pro players on the third floor of the association headquarters: the Player's Room.

Beeeeeeep ····· beep, beep, beep.

"Oh?"

Snap. Click! I move the piece across the board as I respond, hitting the chess clock switch immediately after.

Both of us have fifteen minutes of waiting time. Once that's up, all moves must be made in thirty seconds. Practice style Shogi.

"Some girls in my class were talking about it. Said it was fun."

Snap. Click! Big Sis uses no time at all either, makes her move and flips the switch.

With important matches out of the way, pro Shogi players are ready for a long spring break. No one except Big Sis and I are around because there aren't many matches to play. Doing that three-day remedial practice punishment right now.

"Hmmm ·····," I mumble and make my move.

The whole point of this conversation is to establish a rhythm. Neither of us is listening to a word the other says.

Big Sis brought up Universal Studios Japan, but if she or I actually went, we'd either go to a Shogi classroom or play Shogi in one of the karaoke places. They've got private rooms where we can eat and drink as much as we want and no one will ever complain that we're being too loud: perfect for Shogi. Heck, playing all night would be a breeze.

"About tomorrow."

Snap. Click!

"What about it?"

Snap. Click!

"Any plans, Yaichi?"

"I don't have anything going on——."

Both of us are already playing with a thirty-second limit. Using each other's turns to read the board, we answer with slow, steady voices.

"But tomorrow's the day my apprentice takes her Practice League Test."

Snap!! Click!!

Big Sis snapped her piece down with vigor. I'm surprised the clock is still in one piece. She's really into it.

"…… And?"

"Well, I thought I'd go watch, just for fun."

Snap. Click!

"Aren't you being overprotective?"

"Well, I'm sure getting into the Practice League will be a cakewalk for my Ai."

"……"

Big Sis's outstretched hand stops in midair and clenches into a fist. She's reading up to the last second.

"But I feel responsible for her, staying at my place and all. And there's nothing for me to do at home. Nowhere else I'd like to go either. No one would come with me," (grimace).

"……"

Beep! Beep! Beep——.

"When it comes down to it, she's cute, so I never get tired of her face. Apprentices are like that."

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!!

The chess clock's loud alarm bell rings.

Time's up.

"Ah, um …… Big Sis? It looks like time ran out ……"

"Sure does."

Big Sis stands up like nothing happened after losing to a rule violation.

I know what's going on.

This is …… Big Sis when she's pissed off.

But why? Was it something I said? We were just talking about our plans for tomorrow, right ……?

"Big Sis? What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Work," she answered without missing a beat, but the clearly irritated Princess left the room without another word.

Work on a Sunday? Maybe the Women's League has an event or something? She prioritizes Shogi studies above all else, so I doubt she'd get involved ……

"Well, it's nothing I have to worry about."

Putting the pieces back, I head out the door too.

I go down to the second-floor classroom just in time to see Ai getting stars stamped on her Match Card.

"Oh! Master!"

"How'd you do today?"

Ai sticks up four fingers and smiles from ear to ear. Won four in a row?

It would be better for her to have these victories fresh in her

mind for tomorrow. It's only lunch time, but this is a good time to call it a day. I tell her to take the afternoon off.

"Want to grab a bite at *Twelve* for luck?"

"Yay! A restaurant!"

In order to energize Ai, just as we decide to eat at one of the restaurants on the association's first floor and head down the stairs, I spot a couple staring at the building map just inside the front door.

Middle-aged ……? They're probably married, but not very old.

Both the man and the woman look like they've got their ducks in a row. No offense to Shogi fans, but these two don't look like the type of people that would come here to play Shogi in the early afternoon.

"Hello there. Can I help you find something?"

Being a pro Shogi player is all about service. I put on a gentlemanly smile and greet them.

Their eyes jumped open a little wider upon seeing me.

However, they looked much more surprised to see my apprentice following me down the stairs. They practically scream in unison.

"Ai!"

"Ai!"

As for the screamee, Ai——.

"Daddy!? M-Mommy!?"

…… Come again?

AI'S PARENTS

A man that carries himself with the air of an old warrior.

"My name's Takashi Hinatsuru."

We are at the association's first floor restaurant *Twelve*.

Sitting across the table from us, Ai's parents are rather subdued, completely different from their energetic daughter. It's almost scary ……

"…… My father is our inn's chef."

"…… I see."

Ai quietly whispers into my ear next to me.

Her father, whose air just screams "artisan!" reminds me a lot of Master Kiyotaki. Not that he seems the type to pee out his workspace window, it's more, I don't know, the air about him?

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*, it was a pleasure to host the Ryuo Title Match."

"I-I should be the one thanking you ……"

"I regret not being able to greet you in person as my duties in the kitchen prevented me from leaving my post. Please allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate you on becoming the youngest Ryuo in history. Also, I've come to apologize for all the trouble my daughter has caused, knowing full well words will never suffice."

With that, he lowered his head and I'm the one who doesn't know what to say. This feels weird, as if Master were bowing his head to me ……

However.

Things were about to get much more uncomfortable.

"I'm Akina Hinatsuru."

Now it's Ai's mother's turn.

"I oversee the day-to-day operations of our family's inn, HinaTsuru. It really *was a pleasure* hosting you, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, and all of our guests from the Shogi world."

She looks exactly like Ai, a bombshell …… But her *heavy* air and thorn-laden polite voice send chills running down my spine.

It was the Ryuo Title Match, when I earned my title of Ryuo.

Taking place over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, people involved with Shogi from all over Japan gathered at the HinaTsuru on that premium Christmas weekend to watch the season's final title match.

There's no way the match's after-party wouldn't get a little out of hand.

My drunken Master said something crazy like "I am … Shogi!" before doing something even crazier, throwing off his robe and stripping down to his boxers. He forced me to strip down myself and all the young pros from Kansai that came to cheer me on followed suit. Then, everyone ran out into the lobby and started playing "human Shogi" in nothing but their skivvies. That's when some reporter on the scene got the fantastic idea to broadcast that game live over the Internet. People were talking about it for weeks.

I don't want to remember what happened that night, and I'm sure that the inn's staff doesn't have fond memories of that deplorable evening …… yeah? Seeing me brings them flooding back in. One after another.

Burying memories of that awkward night as deep as possible, I force a smile and say, "W-Well, you've already come this far. Why not have a bite to eat? I recommend the 'Extraordinary Pork Beauty.' It's really good."

I open the menu and explain.

By the way, the 'Extraordinary Pork Beauty' is an original creation by the chef here at *Twelve*. They take a tender piece of pork, add a light breading, and then smother it in a sweet *sake* sauce to make this tasty dish. The name is a bit strange, but I like it. They also have another one called 'Dynamite,' but that name is so out there that I don't remember ever ordering it.

"I'll have the 'One Bite Head-Over-Heels Cutlet' lunch set. How about you?"

"The same."

"O-Oh, all right then ····· Ai, what would you like?"

"Buttered rice!!"

When all was said and done, only I got the 'Extraordinary Pork Beauty.' It's really good ····· But that name ·····

The food came and the conversation started back up once everyone except Ai was finished. She's scooping the rice into her mouth, but there's so much on her plate and her mouth is so tiny that she won't be finished anytime soon. Just take your time ···

"If I may ··· about you taking on my daughter as an apprentice ···"

Her father wipes his mouth with a napkin and continues.

"My wife and I have discussed this at great length and decided——to oppose this arrangement. We can't allow her to be any more of a bother than she already has been to someone as prestigious as yourself."

"Nhhh!! MUMMMM!!"

"Ai. What have we told you about speaking with your mouth full?"

Scolded by her father, Ai shovels even more rice into her mouth and chews at a blistering pace. Hang in there.

Twelve knows how to make a delicious pork cutlet, but even that wasn't enough to make her parents more willing to listen.

"W-well … I can't deny that sending your daughter to live with a complete stranger to train might seem a little bizarre in this day and age …… It's only natural that you, as her parents, would be against it."

"No. That's perfectly fine."

Say what?! Perfectly fine?!

"In our lines of work——whether it's managing an inn or working in cuisine, living with your instructor is common practice. I have been told that Shogi is much the same."

"That, well …… Why yes. That …… That it is ……"

I make my responses as vague as possible.

Live-in apprentices are a dying breed in the Shogi world. I'm pretty sure that Big Sis and I are the only ones under forty who have done it. Master Kiyotaki must have left out that detail when he spoke to them.

"I firmly believe that children need to be separated from their parents when training to become truly skilled in any occupation. I have no words to express my gratitude to you for accepting our daughter into your home, Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

"You're welcome."

"However, whether or not this is the best option for our daughter's future is another issue entirely——. The point is, would becoming 'a Women's League player' be in our daughter's best interest?"

Ai's mother cut in before her father could finish what he was saying.

"Being her mother, I took the liberty of doing my own research …… Women's League players rarely have a steady income, they have a surprisingly large amount of vacation time, and many retire at a young age, correct? I would like to hear what you have to say on the matter, Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

"Alright then ……"

I pause for a moment to gather my thoughts and nod. "It's true that becoming a Women's League player doesn't guarantee a bright future."

"Master?!"

The last bits of rice finally gone from her plate, Ai anxiously tugs at my sleeve.

But I just give her a reassuring look before continuing my spiel.

"They don't have anywhere near as many matches as the main leagues and are paid less per match. Their remuneration from other parts of the job is also lower than men. It's true that they don't have as much financial security. However," I go on, "In Ai's case, I don't think that will be a problem."

"And why do you say that?"

"Because Ai is gifted with extraordinary talent," I state with confidence. My voice naturally starts burning with enthusiasm. "At the rate she's growing, I have no doubt that she'll claim a Women's Title. Considering her bubbly, friendly personality, Ai would be a shoe-in to give lessons or even get recruited as an assistant on Shogi TV shows. They make a lot more money than secretaries working in some offices."

"……"

"I can attest that doing what you love for a living isn't all fun and games," I say, remembering those dark days when I was getting crushed under the weight of my losing streak——before Ai came. There's nothing more painful than being rejected by what you enjoy. "Then again, a life where you can't do what you love as much as you would like can't be considered a good one. At least, that's what I believe ……"

It's not like just anyone can become a pro Shogi player.

In a world where the vast majority of people give up on the dream, it's much worse for someone with the necessary skills to miss out on the opportunity to go pro.

"A valid point ……"

A thinly veiled grin appears on Ai's mother's face.

"I don't mean to be rude, but how many apprentices have you trained, Kuzuryu-*sensei*?"

"Actually …… Ai is my first ……"

"So how is it that you understand exactly how talented Ai is? How can you claim that she'll win a title under your tutelage?"

"……"

"You seem quite confident, but are your clear lack of credentials enough to place the future of someone else's child in your hands?"

She's talking down to me, like I'm just a kid. Ai's father immediately defends me from his seat next to her.

"Listen to yourself! How can you be so rude?!"

"You will be quiet, please."

"Okay."

Sir?! Don't you think that was too quick to throw in the towel?!

Ai whispers quietly into my ear.

"…… He took my mother's name and married into the business, so he can't go against her."

"…… Sure looks that way."

He won't be much help ……

"I'll ask you again, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Are you saying that your teachings can mold my daughter into a titleholder?"

"Well, I——."

"Yes, he can!!"

That wasn't me, but Ai. She made her feelings known with her spoon still clenched in her fist.

"Master is a great teacher! Always kind, but strict, with a great technique and stamina …… We kept going until morning the very first night!"

"……"

"……"

"Sh-Shogi! She's talking about Shogi?! That's all I've been teaching her?!"

Not only are Ai's parents looking at me suspiciously, the chef here at *Twelve* is too. Why?

"…… Anyway."

Ai's mother coughed as though trying to break that awkwardness that comes from a love scene showing up on TV when watching as a family. Then.

"We're taking Ai home with us. I'm sure you understand."

"NOOO!"

Ai jumps under the table and latches onto the central table leg, ready for a long defensive bout before I can get a word in

edgewise. An *anaguma* in Shogi terms. Solid as a rock.

"I'm ***not*** going home! *Dara*!!"

"Is that any way to speak to your mother *yaine*!"

Mother and daughter start arguing from above and below the tabletop. What the heck's going on ……?

I turned her father and quietly asked, "Um, sorry, but what does *dara* mean?"

"It's a word that means something along the lines of idiot or feces."

Oh ……

That means that Ai has been calling Big Sis something along the lines of idiot or feces with an angelic smile on her face this whole time. Big Sis'll kill if she finds out—namely me!

I've got to make sure the truth never comes out …… But it's all over if Big Sis ever checks the Internet. So, my *cause of death* would be the Internet? Talk about an enemy. But, I still gotta know. Am I sick?

I build up the courage and address Ai's mother.

"It's true that my teachings alone may not be enough. However, there is a Shogi league specifically designed to help women become professionals. She'll receive tried-and-true instruction there."

"What's it called?"

"The Practice League. Women can turn professional after training there and attaining a certain level. In a way, the entire Kansai branch of the Japan Shogi Association will be involved in training your daughter."

"……"

"Ai's already registered to take the Practice League's entrance test, so why not wait and see the results for yourself before making your decision? The test is tomorrow."

"Listen you, he's made a very solid argument ……," Ai's father passionately interjects, taking some of the pressure off me.

The girl cautiously pokes half her face over the tabletop like a hermit crab. Cute.

"So, this Practice League, what is it? What kind of test is required to join?"

"She'll have to play three consecutive handicap matches …… against prospective professionals and full-fledged pros. Her performance determines whether or not she can join."

"…… I see."

Ai's mother slowly nods.

"Should Ai win all three matches, I will allow her to join the Practice League."

"A-all three?!" Ai and I blurted out the same words in unison.

Even her father stood up to state his case.

"Are you serious? You can't possibly expect——."

"You will be quiet, please."

"Okay."

Father, sitting.

"If our daughter truly has as much talent as you claim, she should be able to pass this test with a perfect score. Am I wrong?"

"Um, not wrong …… It's just, this isn't that kind of test. It's not necessary to beat the examiner to pass. Even if the test-taker loses every match, they can still pass if their technique is sound. So please——."

"That information is irrelevant."

Ai's mother cuts me off like a slap to the face. Me, silent.

"Even playing against professionals, if she can't win with the benefit of a handicap, that means she wasn't that talented in the first place, correct? Just because they're professionals doesn't mean they're the best of the best. A truly talented player should have no defeat in three matches in a row. Am I wrong?"

Expecting the impossible maybe ……

Novices often make this mistake, but just because one player is better than another doesn't guarantee that they can win.

We call it a *one-up* or *two-up* ratio, where one player's skill is equal to having the advantage of one big piece over their opponent in an even match. The lesser player could still win a third of the matches.

No matter how talented Ai is, no matter how much of a handicap she's given, there's no guarantee that she, who started playing less than half a year ago, can win three matches against far more experienced players.

I open my mouth to start explaining that, but.

"I won't lose!"

Ai crawls out from beneath the table, matching her mother's a strong tone tit for tat. Grabbing onto my arm, she argues with her in their dialect.

"Master has taught me so, so much! I'll never, never lose *gaine*!!"

"Prove it," her mother arrogantly retorts. "Win every match and I'll allow you to keep training. However, the deal is off the moment you lose and we go home. Is that clear?"

"…… All right. That should be enough," I say to my pajama-clad apprentice and start cleaning up, but Ai reaches across the board to stop me, clinging.

"Master! Just one more——."

"No."

"But ……"

"All pros rest up before official matches. It's an important technique, you know," I tell her while patting her head to calm her down. "You have thirty-five minutes of waiting time for each of the three games tomorrow, one-minute Shogi after that. Then there's the pressure of having to win all three. It'll really wear you out."

"…… Okay."

"There's nothing to worry about. Play the way you normally do, and you've got this. It's in the bag."

She played Shogi all morning, reviewed standard strategy with me after saying goodbye to her parents, and I lost count of how many two-piece handicap matches we played after she took a bath earlier tonight.

Ai is already at a level where she can take games off me with that two-piece handicap. I'm pretty sure she could face Practice League members without a handicap and win three times in a row.

What worries me …… is whether Ai can handle the pressure or not.

Since she's never been in a tournament, the only match she's

ever played that had something on the line was that first match she played to become my apprentice.

That's why I'm afraid the pressure might overwhelm her.

But experience is the only way to overcome it. If there were some magic medicine that eased the pressure, I'd love to give her some ……

"…… Master."

"Yeah?"

I thought she'd long since gone to bed, but she's here, face half hidden by the pillow in her arms and looking right at me.

Plus, she's blushing bright red and kind of fidgety.

Red face and fidgety …… Oh.

"Use the bathroom before going to bed, okay?"

"I don't need to!"

Ai, face flushing red like a bomb went off, grows even more antsy and mumbles, "Umm …… ughhh ……" until she gives the pillow a big squeeze, works up her courage, and practically yells, "Uh, um …… Can I have something to feel you with, Master?!"

"……"

…… Feel me?

"S-Something like a handkerchief or a pen, something you use …… Anything is okay! I want …… a good luck charm for tomorrow's matches ……"

"Ahh …… Got you. A good luck charm."

Yes, yes. Yep. That's what she meant.

Of course, I knew the whole time.

"…… Sure. I'll have something ready for you in the morning."

"Th …… Thank you so much!"

"Now, get some sleep."

"Okay! I bid you good night!!"

After making a picture-perfect bow with her hands on the *tatami* mat, Ai spins around so fast that the hem of her pajama skirt, kitten face and all, swishes around her knees. Then she hopped all the way back to her room.

Ker-chak. Once I heard her door close, "Hmm …… That should work."

I go to my closet to take out my calligraphy set and a white fan.

I wrote my own fan three times just like this: one after becoming 4-*dan*, one when I decided to pursue the Ryuo title, and one after I won the title—*Fresh Start*, *Resolute* and *Keep Growing*. Looks like I've got a motivational speech lined up on the floor …

But I'll write something else this time.

While I don't have any magic medicine——.

I decided to impart something, something that she'll need for every match, the most important thing of all, by pouring my heart and soul into each stroke of my pen.

Courage——.

The next morning, when my apprentice awoke to find a fan handwritten by her Master next to her pillow, "ME——OOOW!!" Her cat-like squeal of happiness woke me up.

PRACTICE LEAGUE TEST

"This way. It will take place upstairs."

I met Ai's parents at the association's front door and led them up to the fifth-floor arena where her Practice League Test was

going to be held.

By the way.

I know I've been saying "Test," "Test" quite a bit, but there is no actual "Practice League Test Day."

It's just added into the normal sessions called "Regular Activities."

And if the examinee performs well, they can join right then and there.

"So, don't think too hard. It's okay—play just like normal, all right?"

Keika, who already holds a C2 rank in the Practice League, offers Ai some kind words to help her relax.

Ai is sitting on her ankles in the corner of the room and looks very very nervous. The fan I left next to her pillow is tightly clenched in her fist.

Currently, there are thirty-nine men and women who belong to the Kansai Shogi Association's Practice League, most of whom are elementary and middle school students.

Nine of them who are trying to become Women's League Players are a little older than the rest.

Keika is the oldest at twenty-five, but I'd say most are in high school. The only elementary schoolers are the two who came to the Practice Group at my apartment, Mio and Ayano, and of course Ai.

"Nh. Good morning, everyone."

The man in charge of the Practice League, Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan*, says a quick hello and takes attendance.

With that out of the way, he pulls out a "Big Board"—a

whiteboard with a Shogi grid printed on it and magnetic Shogi pieces—to do a quick strategy lecture and gives the Practice League members a life lesson.

Today's lecture went like this.

"Tell me, what kind of things do each of you do to get better?" Kuruno-*sensei* asks the rows of Practice League members in a kind voice, looking at each of them in turn.

The grade school members answer first. "Play matches every day!" "Solve lots of Shogi puzzles."

"Nh. Playing matches, solving puzzles, there are many ways to improve. But the most important one is to keep *building*. For example," he continues, "for people who have difficulty maintaining correct posture, try sitting on your ankles throughout your first match today. Then try to maintain it well into your second match during the next session. Then through the end of the second match during the following session …… Keep *building* like that and you'll be far better than you were when you started before you know it. This is called effort."

No sooner did *Sensei* say that then each of the elementary schoolers hastily fixed their posture. It's so cute how they follow directions right away.

"There's someone taking the test to join our ranks today. I'd like all of you to focus. Build on what you've learned. Show her that the Practice League is not just another classroom."

Suddenly the center of attention, Ai froze like a statue. Keika forced a smile and gently rubbed her back.

"Now then, I'll announce today's matchups."

Once he was finished saying who was facing whom with what

handicap, the Practice League members went straight to the Shogi boards and started lining up their pieces at once. Desire to get started is radiating out of each and every one of them. Even my fingers start moving on their own.

With only one left uncalled, Kuruno-*sensei* turns his attention to Ai.

"Miss Hinatsuru, you play at a 3-*dan* rank in the classroom downstairs, yes?"

"Y-yes!"

"Nh. Then let's see what you can do against Miss Sadatou without a handicap."

Ai's first opponent will be Ayano Sadatou, one of Ai's Practice Group friends.

She may only hold an F1 rank as a new Practice League member, but I saw her play during the Grade Schooler Practice Group. She has a great feel for Shogi.

An even match with no handicap. Ai was assigned the second move with the flip of a piece.

"Now, please get started."

"Ready when you are!" they both say at once.

All the participants bow to each other at the call of their instructors and every match gets underway. The electric chess clocks hum to life as the first clacks ring out from the Shogi boards.

"Whoa ……"

Ai's father lets out something like an impressed sigh. Even her mother is watching intently.

The bubbly, excited atmosphere is gone, as are the young,

innocent expressions from each child's face. It's gotta be strange for someone seeing this for the first time. A bunch of young assassins who are trying to kill each other's Kings are here now.

Now then, about Ai's match——.

"Would you look at that. Ai's got a chance to take the lead."

"Huh?" her parents respond in unison, looking to me for clarification.

"Ai's opponent is being overly cautious and set up her defenses too soon. That actually opens up a weak spot in her formation. It's not big enough to bring the whole thing down but ……"

But, it's more than enough for Ai.

"…… Nhh!!"

Ai rams her Bishop into the formation to bring it all down—using no time.

"Huh?!"

Ayano is stunned by Ai's decision to use one of her big pieces in a suicidal attack run right off the bat.

"*I-I have no choice but to take it!*"

She has that look in her eyes and takes the Bishop. That opened the floodgates to an all-out onslaught.

Seizing her chance, Ai used absolutely no waiting time as she systematically cornered Ayano's King all the way into checkmate.

She found a tiny hole in the wall and forced it open with an attack as ferocious as a storm surge.

"There …… There are no options left …… I've lost ……"

Still not sure what hit her, Ayano lowers her head in a daze.

Ai's brain is still working so fast that, "thankyou!" her words blended together. Ai practically throws her head down. Even her

cheeks are flushed red with excitement.

Surprised to hear a match coming to an end, the nearby kids start talking in a frenzy.

"For real?"

"Over already?"

"Baby Dragon is a beast ……"

Only 34 moves were made. Matches normally last for nearly 100, so that one was incredibly short.

Ai's father is just as surprised.

"D-Did she win already?! Ai?!"

"Your daughter's determination won the match. She took advantage of her opponent's momentary lapse before she was ready to fight."

"Determination?" Ai's mother says in her prickly tone. "Shogi is a board game, is it not? How could a player's determination affect the outcome?"

"It's true that Shogi is a board game."

Twenty years ago——when the current, unquestioned ruler of the Shogi world claimed all seven titles, a journalist asked him, "What is Shogi to you?" This was his answer.

"Shogi is——just a game. However, as long as two people are facing off, mental elements such as overconfidence, fear and other emotions will always play a part."

Even in this match, if Ayano had just taken a deep breath and analyzed Ai's attack without getting rattled, there were many opportunities to take the upper hand.

But she got swept up in Ai's big piece sacrifice and extremely fast pace, which caused her to make a bad move and ultimately

lose this extremely short game.

Heck, Ayano had the first move in an even match. She would've had the advantage by attacking first. Being unable to do so means she lost her determination right then and there.

"You're very good, Ai …… Too good ……"

"B-But I nearly lost a few times …… Went a little too quick ……"

The two of them start doing the review session and, "Ohh ……?"

A person behind them who came in for a closer look let out a curious breath.

Ai's approach was just that impressive. The final formation on the board put her talent on full display.

That talent of hers attracted another talent.

⌂ PRO

"Nh. I'll be the next opponent."

My eyes flew open once I saw the man who named himself.

"Kuruno-*sensei* is going to ……?!"

Manager of the Practice League—Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan*.

Ai's father asks me in a hushed voice, "Who is he?"

"He oversees the Practice League …… Should Ai get accepted into the league, he'll be the one instructing her. He has a B1 ranking, a full-fledged pro ……"

Just for comparison, I'm three levels below him in C2.

Completely different from the *Kuzu* Ryuo who claimed the title on a lucky hot streak, Kuruno-*sensei*'s skills are the real deal. His

unique sensibility, known as *Kuruno World*, strikes fear into the hearts of pro Shogi players everywhere.

"So, she really is playing against professional Shogi players ....."

"Indeed. She will, of course, have a handicap."

A two-piece handicap to be exact. Kuruno-*sensei* will be playing without his Bishop and Rook.

Under normal circumstances, he'd also play without the left and right Lances in a four-piece handicap, but it looks like he wants to see just how good Ai is for himself.

Ai's parents can't hide their surprise at seeing their daughter sitting across the board from a pro Shogi player either.

Both of their gazes trained on her, Ai squeezes her fan with her hands resting on her knees before lowering her head and saying as loud as she could, "I-I'm ready to play when you are!"

"Nh. As am I."

They bow. Then Kuruno-*sensei* removes his suit jacket to reveal the short-sleeved shirt underneath.

Taking off his suit jacket before the first move is part of Kuruno-*sensei's* pre-match routine. So is playing in short sleeves. It also lets everyone know he's not holding back.

The lively room's entrance gets noisy.

"So, who is it? Who's the Ryuo's apprentice?"

"Whoa! Sounds like she's gonna play Kuruno-*sensei*!"

"This'll be good."

The Kansai Shogi world is a small one. Rumors of "strong kids" spread fast. Staff members, Sub League members, journalists and even pro Shogi players are gathering to see just how strong Ai is

for themselves.

Ai's father is having a hard time stringing words together in this charged atmosphere.

"D-Does she stand a chance ……?"

"Anyone else, and I wouldn't have much hope …… But Ai could win this!"

She can win if she follows standard strategy and maintains an advantage …… But …

"Nh …… I see. You've been studying. In that case——."

After following the standard for several turns, Kuruno 7-*dan* makes a move that deviates from convention.

"!? ……"

With this strange move it looked like he passed this turn. Ai's hand freezes on the spot.

Clench, clenched, clench. She's leaning forward, squeezing her fists together on her knees. It's still early game, but she's carefully reading the board. No matter what move comes her way, Ai focuses all her energy on figuring out its purpose. That talent of hers is spreading its wings.

"…… Here, here, hereherehereherehere …… Yes!"

Body swaying side to side to establish a rhythm and quietly whispering to herself, Ai forcefully pushes a piece forward. A strong move!!

"Whoa! You guys see that!?"

"She's got guts!"

Ai's father was caught off guard by the audience's happy reaction.

"W-What's happening?"

"Ai has chosen to completely reject her opponent's plan of attack, which will lead to the fiercest possible battle. The idea of challenging a pro Shogi player to a contest of strength doesn't frighten her at all. Your daughter has nerves of steel."

"I had no idea she had this in her ……"

Ai's father and mother watched their daughter as if seeing her for the first time.

Kuruno-*sensei* keeps his eyes on the board, tense as he opens his mouth.

"Nhh …… Ryuo."

"Yes?"

"Those three bags over there are mine. Please bring me the middle one."

"S-Sure!"

I walk over to the three large sports bags in the corner of the room and grab the middle bag. Whoa?! This thing is pretty heavy?!

"*S-Sensei* ……! Your bag ……!"

"Nh. Thanks."

He takes the bag from my outstretched hands and pulls out a circular contraption from inside. Pretty darn big.

He sets the machine down behind his back and flips the switch.

Whirrrrrrrr …… A low, quiet hum echoes through the room. The gallery is having a field day.

"That's Kuruno-*sensei's* air purifier ……!"

"He's playin' for real! This ain't no instructional match …… The pro is goin' for the win!"

I-It's one of Kuruno-*sensei's* "Seven Match Items," the minus ion air purifier!

"…… Does that make any difference?" Ai's mother frowns. A valid question.

"It puts his mind at ease …… That's my theory, but that little bit of reassurance is very important."

"How do you mean?"

"In order for the brain to reach its peak level of concentration, it's necessary to remove any anxiety or outside distractions. Humans can't concentrate to their full potential when something is bothering them."

That's why pro Shogi players use many different methods, like keeping their schedules open before matches, wearing earplugs during the match or doing other little things to keep their minds clear. There was even a guy who had the hotel turn off their waterfall during the title match.

That probably means that for Kuruno-*sensei,* knowing "minus ion air is clean ♪ " helps him relax that extra little bit. I think. Maybe.

"Eliminating all the small distractions allows him to get *in the zone* and completely focus on the match. I believe he needs that machine to do it."

"Is it really necessary to go that far to play Shogi?"

"Professionals completely devote themselves and their livelihoods to playing Shogi. Every little bit helps."

I've gotten used to Ai's mother's tone.

Ai told me last night that this inn manager, her mother, apparently always hated Shogi. The local Hot Spring Association asked them to host the Ryuo Title Match, so she never saw Shogi players do anything more than playing around. Ai thinks that her

mother's father—Ai's grandfather—ignoring his duties at the inn to play Shogi could be the reason for her disdain.

But for everyone in here, Shogi is our reason for living. We truly believe that without Shogi death is the only thing left. We battle with that in our hearts.

"On a related note, I've heard that some Chinese *Go* pros play in tournaments with needles in their heads."

"N-Needles?! In their heads?! They play with those things just sticking out?!"

"That's how badly they want to win. That's everything. Anything it takes to win."

The match has already passed through the mid-game and dives right into the ever-difficult late game.

We may be professionals, but it's not like we can magically conjure pieces out of thin air. In order to overcome a two-piece handicap without some of the big pieces on your side, you have to trick your opponent and chip away at their forces while steadily building your own.

Therefore pros set traps all over the board.

It's sort of like setting landmines, blowing the wayward pieces that come too close to your territory sky high. The strategy is to slowly dismantle your opponent piece by piece.

But Ai keeps her nose to the board, rocking her body side to side ever so slightly and reading the formations. Then she boldly sends her Silver into a minefield.

"Nh?!"

Kuruno 7-*dan*'s eyes bulged in surprise at Ai's determination to point a sharp blade directly at her superior opponent's King.

Her Silver deftly avoids the traps, practically dancing across the board and wreaks havoc on his formation. Ai then sends both her Rook and Bishop to tear his defenses apart at the seams. Intense. Even the audience is burning with excitement, enough to make the room heat up. Competitive fire sparked and blood boiling, the combatants let loose.

"Nhh ……" Kuruno-*sensei* folds his arms and groans.

I'm sure he was expecting at least one of his traps to work, but all of them failed. He underestimated Ai's talent.

Pesky little traps were nothing to the untamed, fully unleashed talent sitting before him.

"Nh!!"

After much internal deliberation, *Sensei* decides to charge into battle. Rather than protecting his own King, he launches an all-out assault on Ai's.

Making sure the two of them couldn't hear me, I whisper quietly to Ai's parents as soon as I see that move, "He's lost."

"Huh?"

Ai's father looks at me with surprise.

"It-it's already over?"

"Yes. Many moves still need to be made, but there's no escape for Kuruno-*sensei*'s King. All that's left is to see if Ai notices ……"

If she decides to go on defense now, the tide will turn against her. It's another trap, a tactic.

There's a *trust* that comes with the *pro* designation.

"As a pro, they're definitely better than me."

"As a pro, they've definitely read everything."

Everyone has this *trust* when it comes to pros. Therefore, they often use this *trust* against their opponent to find mental weak spots and exploit them.

"The pro has stopped protecting the King and has gone on the attack. That King must be invulnerable …… Then I'd better protect mine!"

The moment Ai believes that *trust* rather than what she's reading on the board, she's already lost. There is no path to victory in Shogi if you don't believe in yourself.

I was worried about her——but it turns out I didn't need to worry.

"…… Yes!"

Ai puts Kuruno-*sensei*'s King in check with no hesitation and closes in. She's got the enemy King completely cornered. That means she listened to her gut feelings, believed in herself.

Kuruno 7-*dan* places his hand on top of his piece stand once he saw that move.

"Nh. I have lost."

"Th …… Thankyousoverymuch!"

Ai quickly lowers her head too.

Sure, she had a handicap, but I can tell she's excited about winning against a pro Shogi player. Those flushed cheeks and watery eyes say it all: she put everything she had into reading the board. Her left hand, still clenching the fan, shook the whole time.

After a quick review session, Kuruno-*sensei* came up next to me and whispered so quietly that no one else could hear. "She's good. At that level, she doesn't belong in the Practice League."

"Do you really think so, Kuruno-*sensei*?"

"I know so, because I just got thoroughly trounced by that talent of hers."

Sensei's face relaxed after a tense smile and he nodded.

"I'd love to teach her. Two consecutive victories and defeating a pro with a two-piece handicap should be plenty."

With that, Ai should be accepted into the Practice League, except ……

He must not have noticed my lack of enthusiasm because he immediately turned to Mr. and Mrs. Hinatsuru standing next to me with a big smile on his face.

"Are you her parents? You have an incredibly talented daughter."

"D-Do you really think so?"

Ai's father looks overjoyed. No parent would ever not like to hear someone singing their daughter's praise.

"I do. Her ability to accurately read the situation was surprising, but she has a very strong spirit. That's what's really good."

"Spirit ……? What does that have to do with Shogi talent?"

"Everything," Kuruno-*sensei* and I answer as one.

"Most Shogi matches end with *surrender*, so matches come to a close with one player admitting defeat. Therefore it takes a very strong spirit to believe in yourself and keep fighting without giving up when you're against the ropes."

"So it does ……"

"But, the most important thing of all is having a spirit strong enough to get back up after a loss."

"After a loss?"

The look on Ai's mother's face seemed to say *isn't it all over when you lose?* So Kuruno-*sensei* offered an explanation.

"Losing is a part of Shogi. Play against someone better than yourself and you will lose. At the same time, you'll never improve without playing against people better than yourself."

Joining the Practice League, and trying to join the Women's League, means losing thousands, tens of thousands of matches.

Once the losses become too much to handle, once you start thinking you'll never get any better and give up, that path will close.

"True failure only happens when the spirit gives out. But if the spirit stands strong, it's not an actual loss. That's why the most important talent to possess isn't Shogi skill, but a strong spirit. It's also the most difficult talent to acquire."

Kuruno-*sensei* finishes his convincing speech and grins at me.

"I can see why the Ryuo took her as apprentice."

"Well, you know …… Hahaha." I laugh to cover the truth. There's no way I can tell him that *she* was the one who came all the way to my apartment to ask me to take her.

"And she has the talent. Yaichi, have you considered having her join the Sub League in the future?"

"Sub League?" Ai's father asks.

"Yes. It's a step above the Practice League and the gateway to becoming a professional Shogi player. More women have started getting into the league recently. While their numbers are still small, they're increasing."

"Is joining this Sub League necessary for Ai to join the Women's League?"

"It is not. In fact, joining the Sub League would disqualify her from joining at all."

"One thing at a time, one at a time."

I step in between the two of them.

"There'll be plenty of time to think about that later …… For now, about joining the Practice League——."

"Not yet."

Snap! A voice cracks like a Shogi piece slapped against the board.

Ai's mother.

"Our agreement was that she must win three consecutive games to keep playing Shogi. Begin the third match, please."

"…… Nh. Understood. Let's continue with the test."

Kuruno-*sensei* didn't look too happy about it, but realized what was going on right away.

Shogi is a useless life skill.

Many people see it that way, and it's true in many cases.

That's why many parents, especially parents who care about their children's future, stop them from playing Shogi at a young age. They set their children on what they believe to be the best path and force them to leave Shogi behind. Talented children are taken from the Shogi world. All for love.

Kuruno-*sensei* is heavily involved in youth programs and has seen that situation play out like a broken record. That's why he immediately recognized the signs.

"Should your daughter win the next match, she'll become a Women's League Player without question."

"Is her opponent that good?"

"Very good, yes. ——She's undeniably the best *female* to ever play in Shogi's one thousand-four-hundred-year history.

Right along with Kuruno-*sensei*'s words.

A beautiful young woman appears in front of the Shogi board like a pure white angel descending from heaven.

"Ahh——."

Ai's eyes flew open.

And the shock froze my vocal cords to the point that only muffled sound came out of my throat.


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"Big …… Sis ……?"

Ginko Sora, possessor of two women's titles, slowly sat down.

SUB LEAGUE MEMBER

"Na …… Naniwa's Snow White ……?!"

Ai's parents said together once they saw Big Sis take a seat.

"You know who she is ……?"

"We came across her while investigating the Women's League Players. But, why would one of them ……, a title-holder no less, be involved with a Practice League Test?"

Not sure where to begin, I do my best to answer Ai's father's question.

"Big Sis …… Ginko Sora *isn't* in the Women's League."

"She's not?! B-But—."

"Yes. It's true that she holds women's titles. However, she's a member of the *Sub League* and *can never join their league.*"

"Sub League …… Is that what you mentioned before, *Sensei*?"

"It's an organization that supports people trying to become professional Shogi players. Ginko currently holds a 2-*dan* rank in that league."

Sub League members 3-*dan* and below give Practice League members instructional matches. Of course, those wins and losses affect how Practice League members are graded.

I completely forgot about that ……

"Originally, the Practice League was designed like a school to prepare its members to test into the Sub League. Anyone who achieves an A2 rank in the Practice League can join the Sub

League with a 6-*kyu* ranking."

"Wait, wait just one minute please! A C1 ranking in the Practice League was required to join the Women's League, right? If that's true then——."

"You are correct. *The very lowest ranking members of the Sub League, the 6-kyus, are stronger than Women's League players.*"

People often get them confused, but Women's League players and pro Shogi players are completely different.

What's different? The biggest difference would be Shogi *Skill*.

You have to achieve 4-*dan* in the Sub League in order to go pro, something that no woman has ever done.

Actually——.

"Ginko is the first woman in history to join the Sub League—— let alone achieve *dan*. That's one of the reasons that Kuruno-*sensei* referred to her as *the best female in history*."

"But …… Then why does she have Women's Titles if she's a member of the Sub League?"

"There are many tournaments for Women's League players, two of which are open for anyone to participate, even if they're not Women's League players, as long as they're women."

Those are the *Mynavi Women's Open* and the *Women's Throne Tournament*.

That's why Big Sis could join despite being a member of the Sub League and thus plow her way through all the best Women's League players who happened to be there on her way to claiming the *Queen* and *Women's Throne* titles, becoming the best in the world of women's Shogi.

That includes *Women's Legend*—Rina Shakando.

Empress—Ika Sainokami.

Women's King—Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

Yamashiro Ouka—Machi Kugui.

All the way up to the *Queen* and *Throne* title holders, absolutely flattening them to become the two-title-holding member of the Sub League Ginko Sora is today.

She was eleven at the time. A sixth-grader.

After claiming her titles, Big Sis has never lost to a Women's League Player, *not once*.

"She's a perfect 47-0 in those matches. The real reason she's called *Naniwa's Snow White* has nothing to do with her hair or skin. White stars piled up like falling snow. A pure white record that has never been dirtied by defeat. That's why."

"And … Ai … Ai's going to face her ……?"

"She would get thoroughly gutted in an even match, for sure. However, there is a handicap. Ai has a fighting chance!"

Just as I said, Big Sis removed a Rook and a Lance from her side of the board when she finished lining up her pieces and placed them in the box.

She'll play without them. The one-and-a-half handicap.

Members of the Sub League with a *dan* only do this when playing against rank C or D members of the Practice League.

Considering that Ai just beat a Pro in a two-piece handicap match, that would put her at least at a D, so it's not hopeless.

Putting it another way, even if Ai became a Women's League player, she'd never win a title if she can't beat Big Sis with this

kind of advantage.

Because she'd have to beat this monster on an even playing field to get one.

"……"

Big Sis lets her head droop ever so slightly and closes her eyes to focus in the short time before the match begins.

Normal grade schoolers would be overwhelmed by her sheer aura right now. Heck, they'd be crying.

I'd love to give Ai a few words of encouragement, but talking to the players at this point would be considered receiving outside help and she'd forfeit the match for breaking the rules. Ai has no choice but to face this pressure on her own but——.

"…… I won't lose …… I, will not lose …… Never ……!" Ai whispers to herself as she opens the fan clutched in her hand and reads the characters written on it with fire in her eyes.

"Because Master has given me *courage* ……!"

"……

Tsk."

For a second there, I could've sworn that …… Big Sis was looking at me. Did she just snap her tongue?

"Please begin."

"When you're ready."

"Re …… Ready wh——."

Snap!!

Big Sis makes the first move before Ai finished her bow. She's piling on the pressure right from the get-go.

Also, her first move wasn't standard.

Ai can't rely on what we practiced anymore …… But, this could

be her best chance in a way. *Standard* formations benefit both players no matter who goes first.

In other words, the first one to deviate *runs the risk of putting themselves at a disadvantage*.

If Ai makes the right move, she'll be in a better spot than if they both played by the book.

"…… Here, here, here ……"

Maybe she understood that, or perhaps her instincts picked up the scent of opportunity.

Ai uses her precious waiting time in the early game, poring over it, reading the board like water pouring into a hot spring. Full power right from the start.

"Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, hereherehereherehereherehere——."

After considering as many options as possible …… she makes her move!

"Nice one!!"

"Think she might pull this off?"

Positive comments come flooding in from the gallery.

A contest of strength outside of the standard playbook. But Ai matched Big Sis blow for blow. Actually she's putting on a show, pulling ahead of Big Sis and receiving looks of praise from the group of geniuses known as the Sub League. She's good!

"She's …… The real deal."

Kuruno-*sensei* let out a long sigh.

Ai aggressively rejects Big Sis's advances and widens the lead the handicap gave her. If the balance of power started out 80/20 in her favor, it became 99/1 in no time at all.

Pro Shogi players throw in the towel after falling this far behind——but.

"……"

Big Sis doesn't seem anxious at all, staring down at the board without mercy like that.

A hint of red has spread out over her skin. It was pale white before the match started.

Eyes glued onto Big Sis as she opens her fan and vigorously waves it at her neck, I open my mouth and say, "Big S …… Ginko runs a fever when she takes a match seriously."

"Preposterous. Are you saying she is having a psychological growth spurt?"

Ai's mother shakes her head as if she doesn't believe a word I said.

"Are you referring to the fever babies get when teething or learning new things?"

"I know it doesn't make much sense from a medical standpoint. But she really does run a fever."

To top it all off, Big Sis's eyes *literally change color* when she's determined to win.

Those eyes are usually an ash color, but they take on the light bluish tint of a winter sky. I sat across a Shogi board from Big Sis more than anyone else in the world, so I know. Big Sis's face changes when she's serious.

And right now, her eyes——are ice blue.

"…… All right, the fun starts now," I heard one of the Sub League members watching the match say.

"*Sub League matches have two late-game stages.*"

Once Sub League members realize they're against the ropes, they make that saying come to life by changing their strategy and playing for the *second late game*.

Pros want to leave a *beautiful record* behind. Rather than suffering through an ugly struggle for no reason, Pros will stick out their own neck once they've accepted their own defeat. It's one of our aesthetics as professionals.

But things are different in the Sub League.

Might equals right for them. There's no room for vague concepts like *aesthetics* in a realm where winning is everything. It's all about achieving 4-*dan* and going pro. They destroy everything and everyone in their way in order to do so. Relationships built over ten years of practicing get thrown to the wolves. That fate awaits all members of the Sub League.

Lose in that league and you may as well have fallen off the face of the earth.

"……"

Snap! Big Sis closes her fan with a loud crack and puts a piece onto the board with the same intensity.

"She pulled her Bishop back!"

"Guess that means she's in it for the long haul ……"

Her Bishop, the only *big piece* at her disposal, is now behind her front lines in a strong defensive move.

Like a wounded beast crouching low and saving its strength for one final blow, Big Sis is looking for a chance to counterattack.

Meanwhile, Ai has realized how far ahead she is but, "…… Kh!"

Suddenly Ai becomes overly cautious, too worried about losing her advantage to make another move.

It's the same pressure a marathon runner in the lead would feel once they heard footsteps gaining on them from behind.

Even the slightest peek over their shoulder would allow their opponent to catch up and ultimately pass by them.

Shogi's late game is a fight against that fear.

To make matters worse, an electronic beep also caught up to Ai, echoing through the arena at the same time.

"Huh?! Al–Already ……?!"

Ai looks at the match clock in shock. Her waiting time gone, it's one-minute Shogi from here on out.

She used a great deal of it in the early game, allowing Big Sis to draw out the match and unleash *another attack* to put even more pressure on Ai.

Time Attack.

Ai's ability to read the board borders on insane, but there's a serious limit to how much she can read without time. Her offense loses its edge without time to think through her options, and one of her pieces get taken.

Big Sis adds that piece to her own forces without the slightest hesitation.

"……!"

Ai should be attacking, but her hand stopped.

She's been making aggressive moves this whole time, but the enemy King keeps getting away. Only her pieces are getting taken. But there isn't enough time to regroup and change strategy. The pressure only keeps building.

It's not just the time.

Big Sis is literally controlling when Ai takes a breath.

"Haa ····· Gh! Uwh ·····!! Haa ····· Haa ·····!"

Ai's pulling her hair, scratching at her chest and groaning in pain. Big droplets of sweat show up on her cheeks seemingly out of nowhere, and her face is as white as a sheet of paper.

Ai's parents watch their daughter suffer with growing unease.

"A-Ai ····· She looks so miserable ·····"

"She's only playing Shogi, so why is she in so much pain ·····?"

"She's hyperventilating."

"What?"

Kuruno-*sensei* explains, "Symptom wise, it's the same as breathing too hard. Breathing more than necessary puts strain on the lungs, increases the heart rate, causes dizziness, chest pain and can be overwhelming ····· Of course, it's not that serious, but what's scary is that Sora 2-*dan* is making her do it rather than there being a natural cause."

"She couldn't be?!"

Yes, she could and is.

"Sora 2-*dan* is watching your daughter breathe and timing her moves to land just before Ai exhales. That triggers a nervous reaction, so she breathes in rather than out and this throws off the rhythm. That's what triggered the hyperventilation."

Even pros under pressure with no time to spare will start panicking in that situation. Whatever slight lead they had can very easily slip through their fingers.

Shogi is a game where humans have limited time to make their moves.

As long as that's the case, there's victory to be had outside of the Shogi board.

A victory that no record will show, one that no computer screen could ever hope to mimic, one that only takes place when two people sit across from each other around a Shogi board.

Ai learned how to play with Shogi puzzles and over the Internet, so she doesn't have enough experience on this battlefield to know how to fight, overwhelmingly so.

She's *playing* Shogi.

However, Big Sis is *fighting* for victory.

"…… This is too much for a nine-year-old to handle."

Even Kuruno-*sensei*, the one who set up the match, groans.

Seriously, this match is like giving a grade schooler a gun and telling her to kill an unarmed assassin. Their talent may be similar, but one has way more experience.

Over 150 moves have been made and most other matches have finished.

Keika, Mio and Ayano have all gathered around the board to watch this heated brawl.

Each of them is watching the match with mixed feelings.

They're cheering for Ai … But they're also jealous of the talent shining through. Then again, it's only natural for people living in such a competitive world to react like that.

"Haa …… Haa …… Kh!!"

Ai's face contorts in agony as time catches up with her. She makes a move, but a careless one. In other words, she messed up.

Big Sis calmly punishes her for it and brings her forces, which were once on the brink of defeat, back to the same strength ratio as the beginning of the match.

That being said, the fact that Ai still has an overwhelming

advantage hasn't changed.

The most important thing for a player to remember after making a mistake is to immediately forget about it.

Because if they don't——.

"…… Ah!"

Ai gasped right after making her next move.

It was a questionable one at best.

Last turn was basically just a wasted move, but this one was bad any way you look at it. The strength gap just got a lot smaller.

"W-What just happened?!" Ai's father asks upon seeing the look of agony on his daughter's face.

And I tell him the painful truth, "Consecutive mistakes."

"Think about it like in baseball. If you pitch with a bad image in your head, the runs start piling up …… That happens in Shogi too. You start making bad moves trying to recover from one mistake."

Making two mistakes in a row, the battle formations start to favor Big Sis almost in the blink of an eye.

Be that as it may, Big Sis didn't move to attack.

"……! Why you ……!!"

Ai is getting frustrated.

Losing the contest of wills, Ai boldly moves one of her big pieces to the front lines.

However, this is——.

"…… She's forcing the issue," Keika whispers beside me and I bite my lip.

The worst move she could make, *kokose*, hoping the opponent will play along.

Big Sis was waiting for this attack ····· Waiting for a moment when Ai couldn't take the physical and mental pressure anymore and exploded.

"·····"

This is the first time Big Sis has used a good chunk of waiting time.

However, it's not because she saw an opportunity and wanted to read as much of the board as possible to take advantage of it.

She's giving Ai time to realize just how bad that move was.

"Ah! ····· Oh, ohh ····· ahh ·····!"

Faced with the mistake that she herself committed, Ai holds her head between her hands with a look of pure despair on her face.

Everyone can see how the formations are shaping up.

Big Sis has overcome the big piece handicap and is building her way toward victory.

But Ai can still hold out and turn the tides again just as Big Sis just did. She hasn't lost until her spirit breaks.

Unfortunately, that's what Big Sis is trying to do.

"No way! She's plannin' to take every piece ·····"

"Harsh ·····"

Zenkoma—the act of taking every single one of your opponent's pieces. It's the equivalent of torturing your opponent to death. Even the Sub League members are scowling, shocked by Big Sis's methods.

Then again, Big Sis isn't one to take her foot off the gas due to that kind of criticism.

Even this late into the match, she has yet to go on the offensive, content to sit back and pick off the pieces that Ai sends to attack

or leaves stranded.

Depriving her of the chance to surrender, it's almost like she's stomping on fingers desperately clinging to the edge of the cliff. Kuruno-*sensei* watches it unfold and whispers, "She'll lose friends playing like that."

"She didn't have any to begin with," I quip barely above a whisper.

Big Sis has almost no friends. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say she doesn't have a single one.

That's just how determined she is.

The Shogi world is a small one. People who meet through the game are fated to do battle.

However, it's impossible not to hold back a bit if they become friends. It's a lot harder to play your best when your friend's career is on the line.

Big Sis avoided interacting much with other players so that she'd never have that excuse.

So she doesn't need close friends or someone to love.

As long as she has Shogi, that's enough. If there are opponents, that's enough.

I have a feeling that once she gets out of the Sub League and becomes a professional Shogi player, she'll put some distance between me and Master as well.

Ginko Sora is that kind of Shogi player, and that's why I have the utmost respect for her.

But right now. At this very moment——.

"…… I'll hold a grudge. Big Sis."

Because right now, she's hitting Ai with everything she's got

both on and off the board.

She learned all those skills and techniques by playing against me.

The two of us met ten years ago and have been playing Shogi ever since. Nah, the two of us met because we play Shogi. It's our only connection, and that bond is as strong as every game we played.

As for how many——at least 50,000.

Like two kids trying out pro wrestling techniques on each other, Big Sis and I experimented with all kinds of battle formations and strategies against one another. Some off-the-board techniques we tried pushed the rules to their limit, and countless others broke the rules entirely. We did whatever we had to do to win. Honestly, the Sub League felt soft by comparison when I joined.

Right now, Ai is being driven into a corner by another me.

Knowing that feels like a sharp blade of emotion right through my chest.

"If only ……"

If only I had been stricter with her.

If only I'd taught her more.

If only, if only I'd played more matches with her.

Then maybe she might have won against Big Sis. If I'd done that, she might not be in so much pain ……!

Just as the regrets were piling up——right then.

The board changed.

"Ai's playing style …… She looks like another Sora-*sensei* ……"

"She's …… catching up! She's almost back in it!!"

Ayano and Mio gulp down the air in their throats as if they

couldn't believe their eyes.

Big Sis, cold-hearted and powerful as she is, couldn't find a way to attack.

Her formation weaker and advantage being gone actually helped Ai focus. Since there was no room for unnecessary thoughts, she could focus solely on finding the best move. She's reading the board again thanks to that.

Now she's drawing all of her pieces back to protect her King, gearing up for a war of attrition.

That's the splitting image of Big Sis's playing style.

Ai is playing for *the third late game*, proving to be just as stubborn as the *dan*-ranking Sub League members.

"Nh?! Is she going to advance from here ……?!"

Ai's seemingly infinite talent leaves Kuruno-*sensei* tongue-tied.

That talent comes down to one thing——an unbreakable spirit.

"…… Not yet …… It's not over yet ……!"

One large tear leaks out from her right eye and falls onto the board as she hangs on by the skin of her teeth.

I instantly regretted all of those regrets as soon as I saw that.

Ai, who reads further into matches than anyone, understands better than anyone. Understands that the one in a million chance for a comeback won't come.

Despite that, she refuses to give up, refuses to believe there's no chance of victory. My tiny apprentice is still playing.

In that case …… if her Master doesn't believe in her, who will?

Just as Ai believed in me during my match against Ayumu, I believe in her. I believe there's a chance to come back until the very last move. There's even a chance that Big Sis will make a

mistake and her brain will explode.

Ai's spirit hasn't broken yet.

It may be close to breaking, but she's fighting tooth and nail to keep it in one piece while never looking away from the desperate situation on the board——her spirit hasn't broken yet!

"…… Hold strong! Hold strong ……!"

That's when I noticed Ai's father whispering under his breath over and over again as if praying for his daughter.

Ai's mother isn't saying anything, her face calm and collected. However, she's clenching her fists so hard that I can see veins popping out of her white skin.

Ai's spirit hasn't broken yet.

That unbreakable spirit is inspiring everyone around her. Everyone watching this simple board game can't help but feel for her struggle. Intense!!

——But, the match.

Big Sis tightened her stranglehold to prevent that one in a million chance from coming and moved into the late game.

Then finally, she put Ai's King into check.

"…… Not yet!"

Ai takes a Pawn from her piece stand and snaps it on the board to hold the last line of defense.

Big Sis puts her in check again from another angle.

"Not yet!!"

Blocked again. Ai draws even more pieces from her piece stand to block the attacks and advance her King toward her last hope, promoting it on Big Sis's side of the board, *nyugyoku*.

Can she make it?! Will the King escape?!

With both sides playing one-minute Shogi, a breathtaking back and forth brawl is unfolding right before our eyes.

Then, when Big Sis put Ai in check for the seventh time,

"I——."

Ai reaches for her piece stand but——.

There weren't any Pawns left on it.

——Checkmate.

"…… I ……"

The hand still hovering over the piece stand curls up into a tight fist. She tries desperately to steady her shaky voice.

"…… I …… lo …… lost ……"

With the last of her strength, Ai threw in the towel.

END GAME

"Big Sis! Why the heck did you torture her like that——?!"

Right after the final move.

Leaving Ai hunched over in a sobbing ball, Big Sis stood up to leave without doing any kind of review session, but I grab her shoulder first.

And to my surprise she was shaking.

"…… I couldn't move in."

"Huh?"

"…… I was trying to win. Much earlier. But ……"

She whispered so softly that only I could hear as her skin, still warm from battle, twitched ever so slightly.

Big Sis——was intimidated by Ai's sharp skills.

She was afraid that the tide could turn against her if they started going blow for blow during the entire match. That's why she didn't take any opportunities to end the match quickly and chose to torture Ai into submission from a distance.

It wasn't that she didn't attack.

She couldn't attack.

Ginko Sora, said to be the strongest in history, the undefeated Snow White, was afraid of a nine-year-old elementary school girl with only three months of Shogi experience.

She'd tried to frighten her opponent, but ended up getting scared ……

"…… Next time I'll kill her quickly," she whispered, almost to herself, before slapping my hand away and leaving the arena behind.

Next time.

With those words, Big Sis acknowledged Ai's talent.

The next time they play——basically she's admitting that Ai is capable of challenging her for the title of best woman in history while avoiding recognizing her as my apprentice at the same time.

Unfortunately.

That *next time* won't——.

"…… Well, that's that."

Ai's mother makes a quiet yet firm declaration.

"……!"

Ai shuddered.

Just as the Shogi board's legs look like a *kuchinashi* berry, those who play the game cannot make excuses in front of it. Doing so is more disgraceful than losing.

That's why Ai didn't say anything—because she understood that doing so meant she'd lose the right to play Shogi at all.

I take another look at the girl holding back both words and tears in front of the Shogi board without saying a word.

This girl saved me.

She helped me, who couldn't even play my own style of Shogi, play my own way once again.

That unbreakable spirit invigorated mine one more time.

Everyone who witnessed the match—including Sub League members, Practice League members, pro players, Women's League players, association staff and family members——they all witnessed a match that would steal the heart of any Shogi lover. I'm so fired up I want to play a match right now because I saw that game.

And for that——I've got some gratitude to pay back.

"Ai."

"……?"

Two eyes just barely keeping tears at bay turn toward me when I say her name.

——You want to keep playing Shogi, don't you?

Without asking, even without saying a word, I knew the answer right away.

Just by looking at those little fingers still clinging to one of the pieces.

"Ai. Stand up and give *Sensei* a proper farewell. Thank him for everything he's done during this short time——."

"Please wait."

I step between them, but Ai's mother turns toward me as if she'd been expecting this and calmly states her case.

"…… We agreed that my daughter would stop playing Shogi if she lost even once, did we not?"

"Yes. I'm aware."

"In that case——."

"However, that's what *you* want for her, yes?"

"What ……?"

"After watching that match firsthand, I've decided that I will do anything it takes to take Ai as my apprentice. So——this time, *I would like to scout her.*"

With those words, I got down on my knees.

Then, putting both my hands on the *tatami* mats——.

"I give you my word that she will become a Women's League player …… I will make her good enough to claim a title! So, I beg you, please allow your daughter to continue playing Shogi!"

I put my forehead to the mat as soon as those words were out of my mouth.

Full prostration.

Even Ai's ever-calm mother was taken aback. Ai was so surprised that she dropped the piece onto the board, the echo bouncing around the room.

"It's true that I'm only sixteen, never went to high school, just a kid without any real-world experience or qualifications …… But! I'm the best the Shogi world has to offer!!"

Ryuo? Very strong.

That goes without saying. It's one of the top Shogi titles! Only the one who wins against pro players, Women's League players,

amateurs and anyone who wants to play and survives that baptism of fire tournament and climbs to the top of the Shogi world's ten million players can become the ultimate Dragon King—and that's me.

Therefore, when it comes to Shogi, I'm infallible!

"And I'll only get stronger from here! But it won't be only me, I swear I'll become the kind of player who makes everyone around me stronger as well!"

Shogi may be a simple board game.

But I don't know anything else that can inspire people to the same degree that Shogi can.

Matches that light a fire in people's hearts just by watching, like the one that Ai and Big Sis just played.

Knowing that I can play just like that, determined to get even better than I am now, I lower my head once again. And again, no matter how many times it takes.

"That is what I am! Please, let me take Ai as an apprentice! I beg you!!"

There are talented children whose parents prevent them from playing Shogi.

But at the same time, there are cases where pros convince the parents to let their children become an apprentice.

I used to think that all the professional players who came before me were sacrificing themselves for the future of Shogi when they took an apprentice. I was certain of it. That it was a sense of duty.

But I was wrong. I didn't understand something very important.

They simply wanted to develop the talent, see what kind of Shogi player they would become and have a front row seat along

the way.

——I want to connect with this kid with Shogi.

That's what I understand now.

"M …… Me too!"

Ai, who had been quietly listening up to that point, sat down next to me kneeling on the floor, put her tiny hands on the mat and said as loud as she could, "I, I want to keep playing Shogi! I want to be Master's apprentice and get lots and lots stronger! I don't want my last game to be a loss!!"

Then she nearly head-butted the floor next to me, prostrating herself too.

"Father! Mother! This is the only time I'll ever ask you for something in my life! Please …… Let me keep playing Shogi!!"

"Please!!"

People around us are looking at the Ryuo, head on the *tatami* mat and shoulder to shoulder with an elementary school, and saying, "Master and apprentice, yielding ……"

"Double prostration ……"

I heard them, and I can practically feel them backing away.

But what's wrong with that? We Kansai Shogi players are strong and stubborn to a fault. We'll keep hanging on by a thread until the opponent gets annoyed enough to give up. Hang on that long and you get dragged through the mud. Even so, I'll keep prostrating myself as many times as it takes!!

"Please ……!!"

Ai and I keep our heads down and wait for a response, wait for her mother to say something.

However, she wasn't the first to speak.

"Enough of this."

"Takashi ……?"

Saying nothing to his surprised wife, Ai's father comes up to us with the same heavy aura she had when we first met and says, "Enough."

——So, he's against it too ……?

Honestly, I thought he'd be on our side after rooting for Ai during the match like that. Did I assume too much ……?

The next words I heard, forehead plastered to the *tatami* mat and crushing weight of despair on my shoulders, were much warmer than I expected.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Please raise your head."

With that——he sits on his ankles in front of me.

And continues on to say.

"Please take good care of our daughter."

"Da …… ddy ……?"

A stunned Ai looks up at her father with red eyes.

Her father, still on the floor, looks straight at me and says, "I would have no regrets leaving Ai in your capable hands, *Sensei*. No matter what the future holds for her …… Even if she doesn't become a Women's League player. What she can learn from you and the experience of fully committing herself to playing Shogi will have an important and irreplaceable impact on the rest of her life.

Watching her play in today's matches has convinced me beyond a shadow of a doubt."

He then places both hands on the *tatami* mat and lowers his head in a deep bow.

"My daughter still has much to learn, but if you find her acceptable, please take her as your apprentice."

Now he's prostrating himself to us. Caught off guard, Ai and I dive back to the floor and return the gesture.

In that moment, a wave of unprecedented shock burst through the Kansai Shogi Association.

"Wow, the prostraters are multiplying ……"

"It's …… *ai-prostration* ……!"

"*Ai-prostration* ……!"

Whenever two players use the same strategy in Shogi—be it *yagura, anaguma* or another strategy—the word *ai* is smacked in front of it. That's why they described us like this at the top of their lungs. Shogi on the brain ……

"Ai."

Once our prostration time came to an end, Ai's father slowly sat up and looked toward his still-prostrated daughter's small head.

"You don't have to win every time. However, you must become someone strong enough to say, 'I lost' loud and clear when it happens," he says sternly before letting his face relax a little and continues.

"It's not necessary to become a professional. But you must become the master of your own life as a Shogi player."

"…… I will!"

Her father's strict yet kind words were too much for Ai to keep

the tears in and she wipes them for the first time.

"Right in the soft spot ……"

"That's gotta be one of the nicest things I've ever heard ……"

The middle-aged players in the room must really like this kind of coming-of-age story, because a great deal of them are wiping away tears of their own. Even the staff members who thought I might be a criminal earlier are tearing up. That's great but I don't really feel vindicated.

Things are looking up …… But, of course, we're not out of the woods yet.

Ai's father may have granted his permission, but the last boss still isn't on board.

"…… Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

"Y …… Yes!"

The last boss——I brace myself the instant her mother calls my name. No matter what she says, I won't back down. Never, not in a million years.

Now! I don't care what you say, bring it on!!

"Do you have any siblings?"

"…… Do I what?"

"Also, would you kindly inform me of your yearly income?"

Well, those questions took the wind right out of my sails. S-Siblings? Income?

Ai's father took offense to his wife's inquiries and jumped to his feet.

"Do you realize how rude those questions are?!"

"You will be quiet!!"

"Yes, dear."

Now her father's back on the floor, prostrating himself. I knew he'd do that.

"As a parent, I have a right to understand the family and financial situation my precious daughter will be in before giving my blessing. That's common sense."

Is it really like that?

Well, it probably is. I'm sure she's just worried about her daughter's future and wants to ask as many questions as she can.

Shogi players are self-employed. We file our own taxes, so we have a good grasp of that information. Then again, all of our match winnings are public information so there's no real reason to hide it.

"As for siblings, I have an older and a younger brother, I'm the middle child of three. For yearly income, umm, last year …… About this much?"

"I see."

"My winnings from the Ryuo Title Match will be filed this year so, probably …… About this much?"

"…… All right. That's what I needed to know."

I stick up a few fingers to show her how much I made. Ai's mother looks down in contemplation for a few moments before raising her eyes and declares.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Should Ai fail to win a women's title, you will marry into the Hinatsuru family."

…… Come again?

For a second there, I really didn't comprehend what she said to

me.

Huh? I'll have to marry Ai if she doesn't claim a title?

Why?

"Ma-Marrying into money!"

"That guy may be trash, but remember, he's the Ryuo!"

"Engaged at 16? That's gotta be a Shogi world record."

"Fourth junior high pro in history, youngest recorded Ryuo, and the youngest into a marriage for money ever ……"

"Quite the variety. I'm kinda jealous of the guy."

All the warmth the Kansai Shogi Association has to offer floweth over.

"Umm ……? Marry into? Me ……?"

"It's only natural. You are taking *HinaTsuru*'s only heir as your apprentice. Therefore, I will see to it that you are held accountable in an acceptable manner."

"Held accountable ……? Me marrying into your family?"

"Our inn is one of the most widely known and respected establishments in Japan. Carrying on the *HinaTsuru* tradition and maintaining the highest level of quality is our duty as the Hinatsuru family …… Under normal circumstances, there wouldn't be a second to waste in grooming our daughter to fulfill that obligation."

HinaTsuru's manager said all of that in one breath before, "In the event that Ai has not claimed a title by the time she graduates junior high school, even if she has become a professional in the Women's League, she must retire immediately. I will then see to it that she enrolls in a high school in Ishikawa and train her to become HinaTsuru's heir. You will relocate to support her at the

inn to help make up for lost time, Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

"What?!"

I'm going to work at an inn?!

"D-Does that mean …… I'd have to quit playing Shogi professionally ……?"

"Of course, you may continue your career in Shogi. However, you will learn how to operate an inn at the same time. Marrying into the family, your first and foremost duty will be supporting Ai."

"Master! Let's work really hard, together!!"

Ai takes hold of my hand, her eyes sparkling like stars in the night sky. Like mother like daughter, both push until they get their way.

"S-Sir! Please, say something!"

"I'll work hard alongside you ……"

"Your face is saying the exact opposite, sir?!"

He's given up. I can see it in his eyes. That's me in the not-too-distant future.

Crap …… Ohhh, crap ……

"I-I can't agree to this! No, I just can't do it!"

"What exactly is it you can't do?"

"I'd have to live on the north coast, right?! Practice League members may only have to come to the association twice a month, but pros have matches and a heck of a lot of work to do! I can't possibly leave Osaka!! It's not an option!!"

"…… Is that so?"

"Hn. I think it can be done."

Kuruno-*sensei*?!

"Because there are professionals who live as far away as Niigata and Fukuoka. The bullet train connects to the north coast and work in that area shouldn't be too much of a burden."

"He's right. A grade schooler came to Osaka all by herself, remember?"

Even Keika jumps in. I'm being married off, don't you care?!

"There, see now?"

Ai's mother proudly puffs out her chest knowing victory is secure.

Feeling like Osaka Castle when not only was the outer moat breached but the inner keep as well, Ai's mother dons a serious air and asks me, "Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Are you willing to stake your future for Ai's sake?"

"…… I am."

Seriously, I am willing.

All I really have to do is make sure Ai gets good enough to win a title anyway, and even if I don't, I would regret giving up on her right now more in the end.

Straightening my posture, I clear my mind like I would for a match.

Then, just like making the first move——just as determined as moving to engage a Pawn that I can't retreat away from—I say words that I can never take back.

"Please, give me Ai!"

EPILOGUE

"Has it already been a week since Ai went home to the north coast ……? Time sure flies," Keika says along with a really, really long sigh as the two of us drink coffee after grabbing lunch at *Twelve* on the first floor of the association.

"She wasn't here that long, but there's something about her that makes it feel like she was always with us …… It's almost like there's a big hole in the classroom where she should be."

"…… Yeah."

"Are you lonely? …… I suppose I don't have to ask."

"……"

I silently take another swig of coffee. That warm bitterness spreads out inside my mouth.

It's still pretty early in the afternoon, so Keika and I have the horseshoe-shaped counter all to ourselves. The always-quiet chef is cooped up in the kitchen.

A week has passed.

News of the "Ryuo *Ai-Prostration* Incident" spread across the Shogi world like wildfire. Everyone involved with Shogi knows. I even got a message from Ayumu in Tokyo later that day. Thanks to smartphones and the Internet, there's no time lag between Kanto and Kansai. Information travels fast.

The Shogi chatrooms seem to know a little too much, discussing everything at length at the same time reputable sites were starting to post articles.

"What's up with the fourth junior high school Shogi pro, youngest title holder in history and now youngest player to

ever take an apprentice, Yaichi Kuzuryu-Ryuo?!"

"I heard it's a 9-year-old girl apprentice."

"Apparently he said, 'Give me your daughter' to her parents with his head on the floor—had to be a shock to the parents."

"Then that's why they took her home right away! I would too!"

"You guys hear that the Kansai pros call him 'Loli King'? Haha I can't laugh lol."

"So he's got a second title now …… The guy's on a roll ……"

"There's also evidence he rounded up a bunch of grade school girls for a practice session in his apartment."

"For real, practicing what?"

An insider has to be involved, yeah? For me, the fact that *Loli King* came up makes Big Sis suspect number one.

"…… Even my father is grumbling."

"Master too?"

"Yes. *My cute little granddaughter has up and gone home without sayin' goodbye. Woe is me, woe is me.* You get the picture."

Keika drinks the last of her coffee and puts the cup down on the saucer.

"That's why he wants to make sure that Ai stays at the house when she comes back today, no matter what. Have the whole family tree sleeping side-by-side for the first time in a while."

"Sounds great. Ai'll be thrilled."

She went back to the north coast with her parents to make all

the necessary arrangements to transfer schools and prepare for the move, but today's the day that she comes back to Osaka to put her nose to the grindstone and start training.

I knew she was coming right back, but it's been a long week ……

"She's taking the afternoon train by herself, right?"

"Yep. By herself."

Ai's parents only had this to say about me taking her as my apprentice: "There's no point in going through with it unless you're as stern as possible at all times. So, please don't go easy on her."

"Ai is coming here with the mindset that she won't go home without claiming her first women's title. So, as her Master, I intend to not only push her to the limit in Shogi, but to be strict with everything else too. She'll never, ever, get special treatment!"

"One of those *let your darling children travel* kind of things?"

"Then again, it's a bit dangerous for her to walk alone through the city, so I was thinking of meeting her at Osaka station. But I haven't heard a peep from her."

"Meet her at the station? …… Fukushima Station is just down the street from here, one stop away from Osaka."

"Open your eyes! Think, Keika!! A girl that cute walking through Osaka City is bound to get scouted by who knows what agency?! What if she decides to take up an offer for modeling or acting and completely ignores Shogi …… I'm her Master!! It's my job to protect her from those things?!"

"…… And? She's coming directly to us after getting off the train?"

"That depends on how much she brought with her, I guess. She sent most of her stuff to my apartment in boxes already, so she might bring a bag but that's about it."

I did some asking around and set up a welcome party at Master's house tonight. Everyone that was part of the Grade Schooler Practice Group is coming.

"By the way, Yaichi. Did you tell Ginko about the party tonight?"

"Me?! I thought you were going to tell her?!"

"I haven't said a thing?! You made the arrangements, so that's your job?!"

"I-I think she'd be much more receptive if you give her the invitation ……?"

"This is your apprentice's welcome party. How will it look if you, the Master, can't do the simple things?"

Well, I guess there's no room to retreat now. Oh boy ……

"Then, um …… Calling her scares me …… So, I'll send the message ……"

"Don't bother."

"!!"

"I heard everything."

"B …… Big Sisss ……"

Big Sis walks into the suddenly quiet restaurant and orders without even glancing at the menu. "Dynamite, C set." Ordering the manliest item on the menu, she takes a seat next to me.

Keika panics and starts spouting excuses.

"G-Ginko. No one was leaving you out, okay? There was just a little confusion about who was supposed to tell who because the

organizer is even more useless than I thought——."

"Isn't that going a little too far, Keika?! Useless?! A little much don't you think?!"

"Well, I've got cooking to do! See you later!"

She leaves some money on the counter and makes a quick exit.

Now it's just me and Big Sis in the restaurant.

"……"

"……"

"……"

"…… Um, Big Sis? A-about the party tonight——."

"Sauce."

"Huh?"

"It's almost out so get more."

Big Sis didn't say another word after that.

Just to translate for people unfamiliar with how she communicates, that's her way of saying, "I'm going." Big Sis likes to use a lot of sauce, so buy another bottle because she'll use it.

Ever since she was four years old …… ever since our first game of Shogi, she's never said what she means. That's just how Ginko is.

Now that Big Sis is officially coming tonight, I left *Twelve* feeling so light and free that I could swear I had wings. Picking up the bill didn't bother me one bit.

"By the way, never would have guessed that's what *Dynamite* was …… Never in a million years. Even a pro Shogi player wouldn't see that coming ……"

Basking in the joy that comes from solving a mystery that plagued me for years, my smartphone buzzes.

"I'm here."

That's all the message said.

I pick up the pace a bit. She didn't exactly say where *here* is though.

But I had an idea.

A part of me knew where Ai would want our reunion to be even before her message came. So I made sure the door was always unlocked.

I walk through Naniwa toward the station.

Cross the crosswalk.

Go into the shopping district and pass in front of a small supermarket.

Then, the instant I open my apartment's front door——I hear the same words I heard that day, "Welcome home! Master!!"

"…… Thanks."

I give Ai, backpack still strapped to her shoulders, one heck of a smile. Tomorrow's as good a day as any to start being strict.

"I'm Ai Hinatsuru, a fourth grader!" said the girl who has grown a little bit since we first met, just like that day but with even more energy and an even happier grin on her face.

"As promised, I'm here to be your apprentice!!"


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FOR THE AFTERWORD "ABOUT MR. K"

Back when I was in high school, I had a classmate named K who always had a smile on his face and was extremely good at Shogi. The two of us got to know each other because his assigned seat was in front of mine.

Knowing only how the pieces moved, I said, "Hey K, I hear you're good at Shogi? Wanna play me?"

Got out my handmade Shogi board (complete with magnets—the kind that you use during art class in elementary school—with Pawn, King and the like written on them in magic marker) and challenged him to a match.

I had my ass handed to me on a silver platter.

After that, I remember K playing with only Pawns and his King, but I think I lost even with a ten-piece handicap. Honestly, it didn't feel like we were playing the same game.

I was pretty athletic at the time, always placing in the prefectural tournaments as a member of the track team: an athletic nerd if you will. Our high school had a tradition of honoring anyone who placed in a prefectural tournament with a ceremony in front of the whole school. Sure, it was an honor to be recognized like that, but it was also kind of embarrassing. One day, K and I were part of a group up on stage together. They were going down the list, one person placed third in the prefecture, another one got the top prize in a musical competition, but this is how K was recognized: "K has become the Ryuo!"

The gymnasium erupted.

Thinking back on it now, the reason I made the main character

of this book the Ryuo could have a lot to do with knowing a real Ryuo, K, back in high school.

The Ryuo title that he won was the "High School Ryuo," as in not the professional, but an amateur title only for high school students. Basically, he won a nationwide high school Shogi tournament. But since there's only one of those in the country, it was big news for our little school out in the countryside.

I had a chance to have dinner with a fellow alumnus who graduated before me a little while back. He was kind enough to read my work and had this to say: "That's right, the Ryuo was in your year. I still remember when they announced that title, wow ....."

So, I wasn't the only one who was greatly impacted by the presence of a Ryuo.

But K always had that infectious smile. While he didn't change much after winning the title, I never considered challenging him to a match again.

Like many classmates, the two of us lost contact after graduation. However, I came across his name many times once I chose to write about Shogi and started doing research.

I found out that he led to the distinguished Ritsumeikan University to two national titles while studying there.

He also won two of the biggest titles in amateur Shogi to become one of the most decorated amateurs to play the game.

From there I found out that he also played some public matches against computer programs that were becoming stronger and stronger.

What I did know about the Shogi world in high school came

from a popular manga at the time.

I remember offhandedly asking K this question one day, "Why don't you join the Sub League?"

K just looked at me with his usual smile, but there was something different about it that time.

"Because I didn't start early enough."

That was his answer.

He seemed so eloquently resigned to his fate that I couldn't bring myself to say, "Why not give it a shot now?"

That was my first glimpse into the unforgiving world of pro Shogi.

That's what I remember about K—the Twelfth High School Ryuo, Yukio Kato.

····· That was my attempt at an essay style afterword. What did you think?

Thank you for reading my new series: *Ryuo no Oshigoto—The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done*! This is Shirow Shiratori.

This is the fourth series I have written. I started with *Gakuen Rabukome—Schoolyard Romantic Comedy* ⇒ *Hansen Fantaji—Sailing Fantasy* ⇒ *Nougyou Koukou Rabukome—Agricultural High School Romantic Comedy* before this series, which I was originally going to call *Naniwa Shogi Monogatari—Naniwa Shogi Story,* but the topic was going to be Shogi nonetheless.

Why did I choose Shogi?

It all boils down to the fact that I wanted to *write a story filled with intensity and passion.*

Wanting to follow the lives of young people who are fighting for their very futures, the Shogi world provided me with inspiration.

I'm a bit worried about whether readers will pick up on my intention or not …… But I know that I've done everything in my power to convey it. Nothing would make me happier than to receive your opinions and impressions.

Now to give thanks where thanks is due.

I received many fantastic illustrations of characters bubbling over with personality from my illustrator, Shirabi-*sensei*. Not only did he adjust to all of my particular opinions, but he painstakingly incorporated details from my writing into his artwork, as well as providing several fantastic ideas of his own, including Ginko's hairband. Shirabi-*sensei*, I'm so glad to have you with me!

Members of Saiyuki, a unit of young pro Shogi players in the Kansai area, were in charge of supervising this book. I asked for their assistance knowing full well that all of them were busy with matches and promotion activities, but they agreed.

…… I still can't believe my luck, really ……

The reason I decided to set this story in Kansai is because I was inspired by a series of articles written in the magazine *Shogi World* called "Kansai Headquarters' Player Rooms 24" that centered around the daily lives of professional Shogi players. In other words, the very people I modeled the characters after became my supervisors. I didn't know whether to be embarrassed or overjoyed ……!

The amazing members of Saiyuki chose how the match records would play out as well as catching my own mistakes and providing extremely helpful suggestions that shaped the setting and

characters. As one Shogi fan, there are no words to express how grateful I am to Yugo Takeuchi-*sensei* for all of his highly energetic and supportive comments along the way!

But of course, as this is a work of fiction, there are a few places I took a few liberties with reality. Your understanding is greatly appreciated.

I received permission from the Japan Shogi Association as well as individual players when including the names of actual titleholders in this book.

I would like to say thank you once again to Mynavi for providing their cooperation as well.

My editors, Mr. Ohara and the Shogi-loving Mr. Kitamura, did far more than their jobs required to make this book a reality. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that no other light novel on the shelves today had more hours of editing poured into it. I really can't thank the two of you enough. I look forward to working with you in the future.

Several professional Shogi players and Shogi journalists helped to promote my work via Twitter.

My jaw nearly hit the floor when I found out that Shogi legend Mr. Hifumi Kato read this book! "WHOA!" I couldn't help but scream.

Speaking of surprises, I just happened to bump into author and professional Shogi player Hirotaka Nozuki and got his autograph at an FC Gifu soccer match. I thought I'd struck it rich already, but he uploaded a picture of the two of us as well. Nozuki-*sensei*'s Consadole Sapporo won against my FC Gifu that day but …… I'm so glad I came out to support them!

To all the readers who have supported all of my previous works; to all of my fellow FC Gifu fans; to all the residents of Minokamo City, where I spend more time than my hometown, and to everyone who just started reading the series: I feel your support. Thank you, thank you so very much.

I'm devoted to living up to my supporters' expectations and then exceed them by leaps and bounds. Looking forward to the next installment!

Another Ai will appear in the next volume, and battles far more intense than Book 1 are about to unfold. Please look forward to it!

REVIEW SESSION

When I poked my head inside the association's Player Room that day——a maid was playing Shogi with a bunny.

"…… What? Got a staring problem?"

"Oh, if it isn't the Ryuo. How do you do?"

The maid snaps at me while the bunny makes an *elegant* bow.

The girl wearing the maid outfit is Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, the *Women's King*. Said to be the fastest, most decisive player around, she's currently one of the best in the Women's League.

Personality wise, she's just as quick and (extremely) aggressive in real life as she is during a match and holds a top spot on my *beware* list right next to Big Sis. We don't cross paths all that much because she belongs to the Kanto Association, but she always picks a fight with me on sight. Her alias is the *Aggressive Archangel*. Scary.

The bunny girl is Machi Kugui: *Yamashiro Ouka*.

She's an alluring beauty from Kyoto with long black hair that flows down her back like a waterfall with snowy white skin and a gentle aura about her. The elegant, graceful title of *Yamashiro Ouka* fits her like a glove.

At the same time, her *anaguma* defense is so solid it borders on abuse. She throttles opponents with her King safely behind several layers of defenses, depriving her adversary of the last shred of hope, all with a cheerful smile on her face. She's not normal. People call her *Machi the Tormentor*. Scary.

Those two girls are in the middle of a Shogi match, cosplaying

as a maid and a bunny.

Scary.

"What's ····· What's going on here? Why are you two dressed like that ·····?"

Scared as all hell, I ask the two of them and the maid in a miniskirt spits out an answer without looking up from the board.

"Work, what else? Like hell I'd want to wear this thing."

"Did you get a part-time job in Akihabara or Nihonbashi?"

"Whassat? You saying I'm out there ripping people off in a maid costume or something?"

I never said anything even close to that.

"It's this new plan they got going: *Shogi Idols*. The higher-ups are planning an event to draw new members into the Women's League Fan Club by playing Shogi in costume, got it? It's in the works."



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"I believe the bunny costume best suits our cause," the bunny girl adds while casually moving a piece across the board, her eyes narrow.

"Ryou insisted on the maid. But dressing behind the times just will not do. Isn't that right, Ryuo?"

"You brain-dead, Machi? Bunnies and costumes like that—only the perverts like that stuff. Isn't that right, Kuzu?"

"Yeah ……"

Clack! Clack! They start having the strangest argument back and forth, slapping the pieces onto the board at the same time. Now's not the time.

"Surveying the whole league couldn't settle it. So, now the final decision comes down to this game of Shogi."

Machi lives nearby in Kyoto, so coming to the association is no big deal for her. But Ryou came all the way down from Tokyo just for this? How much free time does she have?

They're playing a high-speed, all-out brawl type match where each move takes less than thirty seconds. Do this kind of thing out in the streets of Akihabara or Nihonbashi and fans will start pouring in for sure—as will their money, I bet.

"If you don't mind me asking, where'd you get those outfits? They yours?"

"Why, of course not."

"Wanna get crushed?"

That pissed them both off. Scary.

"Borrowed them from the *Sensei* in Kobe. That man, he has quite a selection of these."

"I see ……"

"And by the way, Ryuo, did you know he wants to talk to you? Something about a cute young apprentice under your wing? Said, *Bring her in for a spell.*"

Whoa …… He's already heard about that ……?

His place isn't really grade schooler friendly, and the thought of taking Ai there makes me sick to my stomach, but he helped me out a lot back when I was in the Sub League, so I can't say no. Better drop in sooner rather than later ……

Ryou's hand suddenly stopping in surprise brings me out of my train of thought.

"What was that? You took an apprentice?"

"Yeah, that I did."

"…… Humph."

The *Women's King* makes a snorting sound with her mouth and reads the board until the absolute last second before moving her Rook into an attack position—a move so bold that I, an observer, gulp down the air in my throat.

Lining up the final blow on the board, Ryou takes a mental break and looks up at me.

"And?"

"And what?"

"This apprentice of yours. Pictures, pictures."

"Is it true you've taken a live-in apprentice? They must be quite dedicated?"

Machi makes a rather suspicious move of her own, staring down Ryou with the eyes of a fox. Scary.

"Sorry …… I haven't taken any pictures."

"Okay then, spill the beans. Boy? Girl? Age?"

"She's nine years old if you must know."

"……"

Huh? What's with the silence?

"Loli …… Don't really see a problem. Taking apprentices is part of the job for top players …… ta complex."

"I agree. Even if Loli …… I'm sure many a child would love to become a top player's apprentice, so give and take? The best one for the position kind of thing? …… ta complex."

"You can just say what you mean."

"Lolita complex."

"It's not like that!!"

The two of you joined the Practice League at her age, didn't you?!

"Taking a young girl into your home and molding her into your ideal woman …… Fitting of the Ryuo. Very elegant," *Machi the Tormentor* says something absolutely terrifying while giggling to herself. She's mocking me, I know she's mocking me.

"…… Gross."

Ryou inches her chair away from me. That kind of hurts, you know, that attitude.

With the match heating up, it's only natural that the conversation dies down.

In an unexpected turn of events for an *anaguma* match, both players send their Kings into their opponent's territory to cause *zetto* (where it's impossible to achieve checkmate, a Shogi acronym that literally means no one can win). Both players come to a stop.

"…… A draw, eh."

"Still unsettled."

The rules state that in case of a *zetto*, the game resets with the player who went first going second but——.

"We lack the time required to play another match …… What say you?"

"Got a point there ……"

They start glancing at me while putting the pieces away.

Both stand up from their chairs, each strikes a pose and they say in unison, "Which one?"

…… Come again?

"We'll leave this up to you, the observer, Ryuo. Agreed, Ryou?"

"Fine by me. That's the observer's job."

"When did I become an observer?!"

"Quit babbling and choose. The maid is better, yes? Yeah?"

"Ryuo, there is no need to hide what you feel in your heart. You like bunny girls?"

"……"

This is hard …… The hardest decision between two choices I've ever had to make in my life.

I have to admit that Ryou as a maid is really pretty. She's the Archangel. Beautiful. The maid outfit beautifully accents Ryou's slender, model level body and unique style. I can almost see her panties too.

Then again, Machi's bunny girl is eye-popping, just like a gravure idol …… Especially her boobs! Those boobs!!

"Okay …… Um …… that one."

In the end, I chose——the bunny.

"Yaaay! I'm elated! Love you, Ryuo♡."

"…… Tsk."

The bunny girl hops up and down with glee while the maid angrily snaps her tongue. But this worked out well. How could it not, what with all the jiggling going on with each hop ……?

"Now then, here you go."

"Hm? What's with the bag?"

"Surely you must know, Ryuo?"

Machi the Tormentor grins an evil grin, the corners of her lips curling.

"What else could it be but Ginko's costume?"

…… Come again?

"Why did you think I came all the way down here? I had to convince Ginko, isn't it obvious? But yeah, you're saving me one hell of a headache."

"Indeed, indeed. You are the precious little brother apprentice, and how could she say no to the great Master Ryuo?"

"Oh, hell no!! You've got to be kidding me!! Big Sis'd never wear that?!"

"You two are a thing right? Figure it out."

"Ryuo, you must have so much fun dressing her in all sorts of outfits during your alone time, yes? Oh, I know you do."

"Like hell I have?!! What would give you the idea that we're dating in the first place?! Please don't make me think about such a nightmare!!"

Whoa! Got an image of Big Sis just as a maid for a second there! Horrifying!!

"Anyway, she's already part of the program with her picture right smack dab in the middle of the pamphlet."

"With big, bold letters saying, *Get your picture taken with Naniwa's Snow White in cosplay*!! That'll take a great deal of convincing."

"Leave me out of your evil plots, would you please?!"

"Wow, this is such a load off my shoulders. Think I'll grab some kebabs before heading back to Tokyo."

Ryou takes the headband out of her hair and unceremoniously shoves it into the front pocket of her apron before taking hold of the doorknob still in costume.

"It's in your hands now, got it? Make sure she wears it."

"I ask you as well."

Machi puts on a very expensive-looking spring jacket and zips the front all the way up to her neck before taking off her bunny ears and slipping them over my head. Then she follows Ryou out of the Player's Room.

"....."

Standing alone with Big Sis's bunny costume in a bag dangling from my hand, I couldn't help but feel this wouldn't end well.

····· Can I throw in the towel?

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

A brand-new series is officially underway! New subjects, new stage, new characters. A series like this is built on solid research. Checking my notes, I first started the process four-and-a-half years ago and submitted the first draft to my supervisor two years later. After many drafts and improvements, I can finally present to you the fruits of our labor. Nothing would make me happier than for you to enjoy it for years to come!!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Pleasure to make your acquaintance. Please call me Shirabii. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would work on a light novel about Shogi. The content may be a little out of the ordinary, but I hope you enjoy Shiratori-*sensei*'s work and my illustrations.

VOLUME 1

Story by Shirow Shiratori

Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO!
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Illustrations Copyright © 2015 shirabii
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Designer: Erika TERRIQUEZ
Producer: Atsushi YANAI

RECORD 1

PROFILE

九頭竜八一 (Kuzuryu, Yaichi) 竜王 (Ryuo)


Yaichi Kuzuryu

REGISTRATION NUMBER:	333
DATE OF BIRTH:	8/1/2000
HOMETOWN:	Ohno City, Fukui
MASTER:	Kiyotaki, Kousuke 9-*dan*
RYUO MATCH:	29th season (Above Class I—1st season)
MATCH RANK:	C League, Class 2
PROGRESSION HISTORY:	9/2009 League 6 10/1/2015 4-*dan* 9/8/2016 7-*dan* 12/25/2016 8-*dan*

TITLE HISTORY:

RYUO:	1 SEASON (29TH – 2016)
TOTAL APPEARANCES:	1 *RYUO*: 1
POSSESSION:	1 SEASON

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“ Here, here, here,

RECORD 2

Ai Hinatsuru

雛鶴あい



DATE OF BIRTH:	OCTOBER 7TH (9 YEARS OLD)
BLOOD TYPE:	AB
HOMETOWN:	NANAO CITY, ISHIKAWA PREFECTURE
CLASS:	THIRD YEAR CLASS 2
FAVORITE FOODS:	CRAB, BUTTERED RICE
TALENTS:	COOKING (ESPECIALLY CURRY!)
	HOUSEHOLD CHORES
	SHOGI PUZZLES

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RECORD 3

PROFILE

Ginko Sora: Queen, Women's Throne



DATE OF BIRTH: September 9th, 2002

HOMETOWN: Osaka City

MASTER: Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan

TITLE HISTORY:

QUEEN:	3 Seasons (7th – 9th, 2013)
WOMEN'S THRONE	3 Seasons (4th – 6th, 2013)
TOTAL APPEARANCES:	6 Times Queen: 3 Times (7th – 9th, 2013) Women's Throne: 3 Times (4th – 6th, 2013)
TITLE POSSESSION	6 Seasons

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"Ha! Ha! Ha! … That name is just a mask that allows me to blend in with the outside world. My true name is something else entirely …!"


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RECORD 4

PROFILE

Ayumu God Cauldron *Viscount*

REGISTRATION NUMBER.	329
ALIAS	Silver Chevalier
HOMETOWN	Deep River
FINISHING MOVE	Right Wing Holy Lance An attack only usable by Knights worthy of wielding the Holy Lance. The enemy dies.
SECRET TECHNIQUE.	Dragon Slayer!·Georgios A secret technique devel oped solely to slay the Dragon King. ·Wield a dragon-killing Lance. The enemy dies.



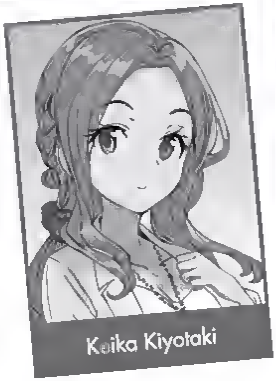
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PROFILE

Keika Kiyotaki

BIRTHDATE:	November 9
HOMETOWN:	Osaka Prefecture
MASTER:	Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan
CURRENT RANKING:	Practice League C2
MEASUREMENTS:	**B 38 IN, W 25 IN, H 36 IN**
FAVORITE FORMATION:	I like the Static Rook style, keep the Bishop contained, and taking my time to think everything through. But aiyagura takes so much thinking, I never know what to do (/_;)



Keika Kiyotaki

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AI HINATSURU:
A third grader who admires Yaichi so much she went to great lengths to become his apprentice.
YAICHI KUZURYU:
Current Ryuo and 16 years old. However, he's been on a losing streak since winning his title.
GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's senior apprentice and "sister." Holds two titles.
KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Daughter of Yaichi's Master, and his idol.


CHARLETTE ISOIR:
A 6 year old attending a nearby school for French students. Far too cute.
AYANO SADATOU:
A level-headed young lady in the third grade.
MIO MIZUKOSHI:
A tomboyish firecracker, also in third grade.
A practice session made up of nothing but elementary school girls. "Grade Schooler Session" is it? Well, this'll be legendary...
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"RYUO'S APPRENTICE"
VS
"NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE"
-MATCH UNDERWAY!!!
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STORY
SHIROW SHIRATORI
ART
SHIRABII
SUPERVISION
SAIYUKI
THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!
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